

ISSUE 62 2003

cineACTION

CLOSE READINGS

Films by

Michael HANEKE

Werner HERZOG

Fritz LANG

Terrence MALICK

Gaspar NOE

Martin SCORSESE

TSAI Ming-Liang

WONG Kar-Wai

Edward YANG

\$8 CDN \$7 US



ISSUE 62

THE COLLECTIVE

Scott Forsyth
Florence Jacobowitz
Richard Lippe
Susan Morrison
Robin Wood

Design: Bob Wilcox

CineAction is published three times
a year by the *CineAction* collective.

SINGLE COPIES

\$8 CDN \$7 US

SUBSCRIPTIONS:

1 year subscription

Individual, 3 issues \$21

Institutions, 3 issues \$40

2 year subscription

Individual, 6 issues \$36

Institutions, 6 issues \$70

For postage outside Canada

US pay in US funds

Overseas add \$15 for 1 year,

\$25 for 2 year subscription

MAILING ADDRESS:

40 Alexander St., # 705

Toronto, Ontario

Canada, M4Y 1B5

Telephone 416-964-3534

SUBMISSIONS are welcomed. The editors
do not accept responsibility for loss.

The opinions expressed in individual
articles are not necessarily endorsed by
the editorial collective.

All articles herein are copyright October
2003 by *CineAction* and may not be repro-
duced without permission.

We would like to thank the Canada
Council for their generous support.

CineAction is owned and operated by
CineAction, a collective for the advancement
of film studies. *CineAction* is a non-profit
organization.

ISSN 0826-9866

Printed and bound in Canada.

STILLS: Thanks to Film Reference Library,
Toronto; Toronto International Film Festival;
Richard Lippe

FRONT COVER: *Chungking Express*

BACK COVER: *The Age of innocence*



THE CANADA COUNCIL
FOR THE ARTS
SINCE 1957

LE COUNCIL DES ARTS
DU CANADA
DEPUIS 1957

UPCOMING ISSUES

Issue 63

1950s AESTHETICS:

Film in Transition;

Minnelli Centenary

Edited by Florence Jacobowitz

and Richard Lippe

Submission deadline Nov. 1

Issue 64

New Directions?

Edited by Scott Forsyth

Submission deadline Feb. 1

SUBMISSIONS WELCOME

2 Unanswered Questions

VISION AND EXPERIENCE IN

TERRENECE MALICK'S *THE THIN RED LINE*

by Jacob Leigh

15 The Purpose of Plot and the Place of Joan Bennett in Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window*

by Andrew Klevan

22 The Age of innocence

MARTIN SCORSESE, 1993

by Deborah Thomas

34 Love Hurts

REDEMPTION WITHIN THE BOWELS OF *SEUL CONTRE TOUS*

AND THE CINEMA OF AGGRESSION

by Dion Tubrett

41 In Search of the Code Inconnu

by Robin Wood

50 Apocalypse Then

LESSONS OF DARKNESS RE-VISITED

by Adam Bingham

54 Vive le cinema

A READING OF *WHAT TIME IS IT THERE?*

by Aysegul Koc

58 ...Simply Because you're Near Me

LOVE, *CHUNGKING EXPRESS* AND *IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE*

by Blair Miller

67 Music and Modernity in *A Brighter Summer Day*

by Saul Austerlitz

72 LETTERS

EDITORIAL

Questions of Value

CineAction originally announced itself, almost thirty years ago, as 'A Magazine of Criticism and Theory'. I was always glad that criticism came first—I think in fact I wanted it printed in bold, with 'Theory' in ordinary type, but was overruled.

Over the last few decades we have witnessed, in the university, theory and scholarship usurping the place of criticism: a major setback for the development of our culture. Aside from the loss within academia, the result has been the degrading of criticism to the level of 'reviewing'. This is not of course to denigrate the importance of scholarship and theory, upon which criticism depends. The three should form a triangle of which criticism is the apex.

Theory supplies the critic with maps, scholarship with facts; the critic needs both, as reference points when relevant to her/his needs. But it is the critic who is primarily concerned with questions of value: the value of the individual work of art, its potential value within a (so-called) civilization that at present appears bent upon self-destruction. The question of value has never been so urgent.

The articles in this issue have been selected (from an encouragingly large number of submissions) for their concern (explicit or implicit) with questions of value. Each 'close reading' was clearly, for its author, a labour of love. Each implicitly, and in a variety of different ways, seeks to provoke in the reader agreement or dissent, stimulating ongoing debate over a film's value. The fact that criticism is not a 'strict' discipline with a Q.E.D at the end of each proposition is a decided positive: It encourages thought and initiative, in which 'teaching' consists not of the transmission of currently dominant theories but of the challenge to fresh independent thinking.

My graduate course at York University this year was on contemporary world cinema, centred upon twelve films by twelve filmmakers. A number of my students expressed amazement, followed by evident delight, when I told the class at the outset that, while they were welcome to read anything they found relevant and helpful, they should devote their time primarily to repeated viewings of the films screened or to viewings of other films by the same directors. We discussed films from Asia, Europe and the Middle East with reference to aesthetics, politics, basic premises and assumptions... Four of the articles in this issue (including my own) derive from this creative interaction.

Robin Wood

Unanswered Questions

VISION AND EXPERIENCE IN
TERRENCE MALICK'S *THE THIN RED LINE*

BY JACOB LEIGH

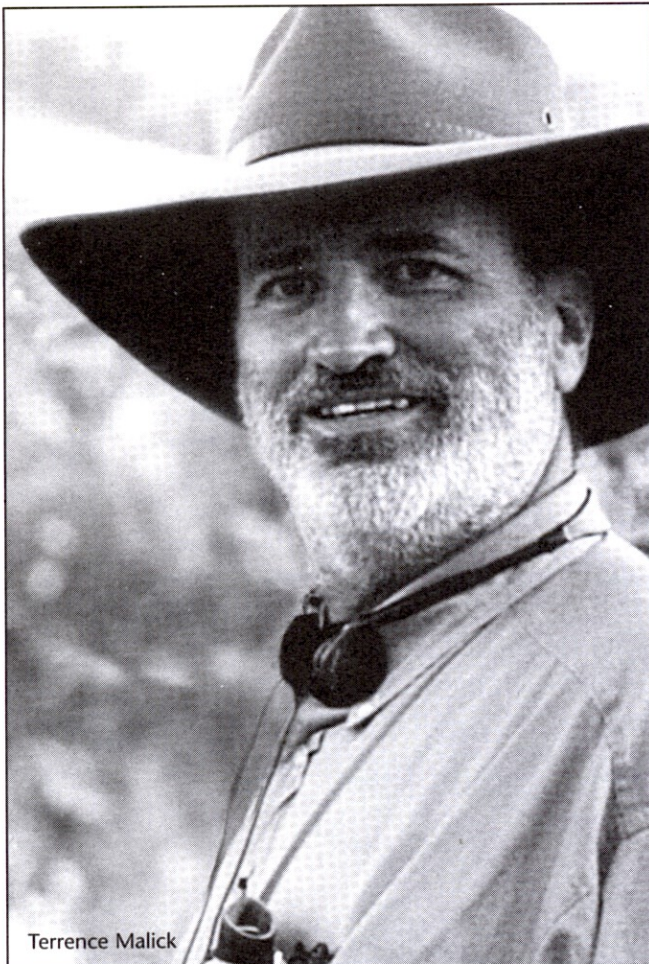
In the chapter "Participant Observers" in his 1972 *Film as Film* V.F. Perkins writes the following:

[F]ilms are unlikely to replace speech or writing as the medium for examining and conveying ideas. Moral, political, philosophical and other concepts can attain in words an (at least apparent) clarity and precision which no other medium can rival. The movie's claim to significance lies in its embodiment of tensions, complexities and ambiguities. It has a built-in tendency to favour the communication of vision and experience as against programme.¹

Perkins' claim about the significance of movies applies to the achievements of Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*; it also anticipates Simon Critchley's advice on how to avoid slipping up on any "hermeneutic banana skins" when interpreting *The Thin Red Line*:

Malick's movies seem to make philosophical statements and present philosophical positions. Nonetheless, to read through the cinematic image to some identifiable philosophical master text would be a mistake, for it would be not to read at all. ... To read from cinematic language to some philosophical metalanguage is both to miss what is specific to the medium of film and usually to engage in some sort of cod-philosophy deliberately designed to intimidate the uninitiated.²

Critchley's informative article brings valuable contexts for *The Thin Red Line* to my attention and I agree with most of



Terrence Malick



Woody Harrelson in *The Thin Red Line*

his observations; yet, though he warns against reading from “cinematic language” to “philosophical metalanguage”, Critchley nevertheless overlooks some significant elements of Malick’s style.

Critchley notes that “[t]he narrative of *The Thin Red Line* is organized around three relationships, each composed of a conflict between two characters.” While I might not argue that Malick “organises” *The Thin Red Line* around these three relationships, I agree that the film assigns distinction to them, although these relationships do not exhaust all the material of the film. As Critchley observes, one relationship is between Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte) and Captain Staros (Elias Koteas) – Malick uses this to dramatise the conflict between an ambitious senior officer, although the film qualifies that ambition, and his more caring subordinate; Tall’s relationship with his senior officers, represented at the start by John Travolta’s General Quintard, provides a context for Tall and Staros’ relationship, while Captain Staros has a significant relationship with his men. The relationship between Private Witt (Jim Caviezel) and First Sergeant Welsh (Sean Penn) yields a philosophical debate between idealist and materialist prompted by and focussed upon war and death. In turn, the relationship between Witt and his dead mother, established in the prologue, provides one context for the staging of Witt’s idealism against Welsh’s materialism. Disagreements over perception put pressure on these two relationships; and this is the case with the relationship between Bell (Ben Chaplin) and his wife (Miranda Otto), his visualised memories of her alluding to Witt’s memories of his mother. Witt and Bell participate in the assault on the Japanese bunker and their comrades in that group play important parts: they include Private First Class Doll (Dash Mihok), who steals a pistol and later shouts to Corporal

Queen (David Harrod), another member of that group, after killing a retreating Japanese soldier; Captain John Gaff (John Cusack), who compares importantly with Captain Staros; and Private First Class Charlie Dale (Arie Verveen), whose collecting of teeth from dead Japanese soldiers in the village produces one of the film’s prominent moments.

Critchley concentrates on the relationship between Witt and Welsh and in this article I do the same. As he writes, “[t]he conflict is established in the first dialogue between the two soldiers, after Witt has been incarcerated for going AWOL in a Melanesian village (the scenes of somewhat cloying communal harmony that open the film).” Here, I shift sharply away from Critchley’s judgements and his methods – he describes the importance of Malick’s use of music and images of tropical plants, trees, birds and animals, but he rests after the mention of Hans Zimmer, composer of the film’s original score, failing to interpret the dense complexity of Malick’s patterning, pointing only to the “cloying communal harmony” of the opening scenes. He proceeds to outline some parts of these, but he draws his conclusions largely from the dialogue, quoting, for instance, Witt’s dialogue and voice-over about his mother dying but not developing his reading further than “the recollected image of his mother’s death-bed.” This “image”, or sequence, forms the focus of my close reading.

The prologue on the island establishes the concerns of one character only; these do not comprise all the film’s themes and ideas: the three subsequent scenes – in the brig, on deck with the officers and down below with the company – all introduce other perspectives. Writing of Malick’s adaptation of James Jones’ novel, which begins with the company, some on deck and some in the hold, Jimmie E. Cain, Jr demonstrates authoritatively that the filmmaker



First Sergeant Welsh (Sean Penn)

closely adapted the novelist's words for the scenes of Witt's reflections on his mother's death, extracting dialogue and voice-overs from Jones' earlier novel, *From Here to Eternity*.³ Cain reports that Jones had originally planned to have the same character appear in all three of his war novels: *From Here to Eternity*, *The Thin Red Line* and *Whistle*. However, in his writing of the end of *From Here to Eternity*, Jones killed off Prewitt, played by Montgomery Clift in Fred Zinnemann's 1953 film. Wanting to illustrate his theory of the "evolution of a soldier", the process by which a soldier comes to accept the inevitability of his own death, Jones reincarnated Prewitt as Witt. Cain shows how Malick modelled his Witt not on the Witt of Jones' *The Thin Red Line* but on the Prewitt of *From Here to Eternity*, illustrating how, for example, Witt's reflections on death repeat Prewitt's reflections on death, also prompted by memories of his mother's death. Similarly, he reveals how Malick paraphrased passages between Warden and Prewitt for the scene between Welsh and Witt in the brig, and between Dynamite Holmes, his wife Karen and General Slater for the scene between Tall and Quintard on deck. Following this, Cain verifies that Jones' conception of nature, as a presence which confronts the soldiers, lays the foundations for the views of nature that Malick's film presents; observing that, "[n]ature obviously repels and attracts

in Jones's narrative, strikes man as beatific and horrific at the same time", Cain concludes that in his allegiance to Jones' vision, Malick successfully "fret[s] out the 'unsevered thread' that binds *From Here to Eternity* to *The Thin Red Line*."⁴

Malick's *The Thin Red Line* begins with a shot that follows a crocodile entering the water. A fade-in to this shot from a black screen brings us into the film's world; just before the fade-in, we hear birds softly chirping, a sound soon overwhelmed by the introduction to the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt's 1980 composition *Annum per Annum*. Pärt's piece is a solo organ work, which he composed to celebrate the nine-hundredth anniversary of a cathedral in southwest Germany. It takes its title from the idea of mass being celebrated daily through the years. Malick only uses the introduction, about a minute long, which consists of a single open chord sustained in the right hand and pulsed rhythmically in the left and on the pedals until the dynamic fades away to nothing. Pärt is a member of the Russian Orthodox Church and he is committed to setting sacred texts to music, composing music that approximates to and appropriates that church's traditions of spiritual chant. Pärt scholar, singer and conductor Paul Hillier notes the link between the Orthodox Church's use of repetitive rhythms in traditional chanting and Minimalism's use of non-narrative process structures and harmonic stasis. While

acknowledging that the “the topic of spirituality in music is like quicksand”, Hillier nonetheless summarises:

The powerful dynamic of this opening chord transforms the disappearance of the crocodile under water, volume and scale launching a level and tone that the film will resume during the battles.

The crocodile’s mouth seems to grin slyly as it slips without splash into the stagnant green water: it moves slowly although its threat comes from its ability to move quickly. The opening shot offers a range of meanings: ancient, pre-historic, hiding beneath the water, the crocodile represents a predatory threat – prompting thoughts of the law of the jungle, perhaps to be contrasted with the laws of civilisation. The sustained chord on a huge organ intensifies the threat and beckons us to consider the jungle as a monument, a natural cathedral, to the scale of creation. As Pärt’s chord fades out, a series of shots presents trees assailed by vines and roots, while an unspecified voice-over asks the film’s first questions: “What’s this war at the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself, the land contend with the sea? Is there an avenging power in nature, not one power but two?”

Gabriel Fauré’s “In Paradisum”, the seventh and final part of his *Requiem* (first composed in 1888, revised and published in 1900) begins. It accompanies images of two Melanesian children opening nuts with a stone, a group of women and children on the beach at sunset, a smaller group of children playing a rhythmic game with stones, and then children swimming under water, filmed from below. We dissolve to a shot above the sea, which pans right and finds Witt looking into the water as he paddles his canoe like Huckleberry Finn on his raft. Witt’s look to his left prompts a cut to a boy walking through the surf holding a fishing rod. We return to Witt paddling the canoe and he smiles a greeting at two Melanesian men, passing on his left in another canoe. From there, the film dissolves slowly to a medium long shot of women bathing their children in shallow water. Fauré’s chorus fades out and Hans Zimmer’s “The Coral Atoll” fades in, more sombre, although still sustaining chords

While Pärt’s *Annun per Annun* evokes an epic though ominous grandeur, Fauré’s “In Paradisum”, coupled with the images of the boys swimming, emphasises a tranquil weightlessness. The traditional *Requiem Mass*, or mass for the dead, takes its name from the first word of its first part, the Introitus: “Requiem aeternam dona eis Domine” or “Grant them eternal rest, O Lord.” Fauré’s *Requiem* is apparently unusual, for example in comparison with Verdi’s, Mozart’s or Beethoven’s *Requiems*, in the high number of times it repeats the word “requiem” or “rest.”⁶ The Latin words heard during this part of the film, sung alternately by sopranos and full chorus, translate as follows:

May the angels receive them in Paradise, at their coming may the martyrs receive thee and bring thee into the holy city Jerusalem.
Jerusalem.

There may the chorus of angels receive thee, and with Lazarus, once a beggar, may thou have eternal rest.
May thou have eternal rest.

Fauré later wrote, near the end of his life: “[e]very scrap of religious illusion I may have possessed has gone into my *Requiem*; moreover, it is dominated from one end to the other by a really human sentiment: confidence in eternal rest.”⁷ Hans Zimmer composed most of the score for *The Thin Red Line*, incorporating into parts of it adaptations of “Christian Race”, an American folk hymn. Besides the Pärt introduction, Fauré’s “In Paradisum” and an extract from a song by Francesco Lupica during the closing shots, Malick also uses the introduction to Charles Ives’ 1906 composition *The Unanswered Question*. In addition, we hear three Melanesian choral pieces, “God U Tekem Laef Blong Mi”, “Jisas Yu Holem Hand Blong Mi” and “Soon My Lord”, the first two of which occur during the prologue, sung by the Choir of All Saints, Honiara. These add to the evocation of a place and contribute to the celebratory and elegiac tone of the opening.

The introduction of Witt on his canoe, accompanied by Fauré’s “In Paradisum”, initiates the film’s depiction of a major character’s consciousness: the two shot/reverse-shot pairs, of Witt on the canoe and the boy then the two men, begin a series of shot/reverse-shot pairs which guide us through the ensuing sequence. The extract from Fauré’s *Requiem* and the images that accompany it mark Witt with that “confidence in eternal rest” of which the composer speaks. The overlapping of Witt’s voice-over with his dialogue and the intense performance of looking by Jim Caviezel link the shots taken from times and spaces. After dissolving to the medium long shot of the women bathing their children, the film cuts to a long shot of Witt standing on the beach, then a medium shot of a mother and child in the water – at which point, Witt’s voice-over begins. Prompted by the mothers with their children and by thoughts of the possibility of his own death during battle, his voice-over recollects: “I remember my mother when she was dying; she looked all shrunk up and grey. I asked her if she was afraid; she just shook her head. I was afraid to touch the death I seen in her. I couldn’t find nothing beautiful or uplifting about her going back to God.” While Witt says this, Malick uses a medium shot of Witt on the beach, watching the mother, then a long shot of the woman leaving the water with her child and passing Witt, then a dissolve to Witt sitting talking in close-up, at which point his voice-over becomes dialogue and he concludes: “I heard people talk about immortality, but I ain’t seen it.” He then turns to look to his left, and we cut to a long shot of children playing in the trees.

The dissolves, between the children swimming and Witt on the canoe, between Witt on the canoe and the mothers bathing and between the woman walking past Witt and Witt sitting in a close-up, bridge times and places. Far from being an unstructured collation of impressions of life on an idyllic pacific island, the prologue rigorously uses a classical convention to close in on one character’s perception. After the long shot of the children playing comes a close up of Witt’s comrade sitting with a parrot on his hand, then a return to Witt, who has his head bowed and the back of his fingers of his right hand raised to his mouth. Witt’s head is centre frame with the point where his knuckles touch his lips just below the middle. Malick slowly dissolves to a close shot of Witt’s mother’s hand holding and stroking Witt’s left hand,

placed in the centre of the frame, exactly where his hand was in the previous shot.

This bridge belongs to one of the most extraordinarily rich sequences in the film. The move between voice-over and dialogue fluidly compresses the transition between times and places, so that the images of Witt watching the mothers bathe their children, of Witt talking to his friend and of his dying mother mutually pervade each other. The dissolve, bringing Witt's right hand to his lips at the point where his mother's left hand holds his left hand, signals a change in time; Witt's pose indicates a shift to a sequence that represents his memory; but the overlapping of these two shots gives prominence to the physical sensation that provokes Witt's remembrance: we see what he remembers and how he remembers it. Malick's film is preoccupied with the relationship between the physical and metaphysical: this dissolve connects Witt touching his hand to his lips, absorbed with the sensation of his fingers, with his remembrance of his dying mother lightly stroking his hand.

From there, the film cuts to a shot of his mother sitting up in bed, stretching towards a girl in a white dress, while between them and the camera a man in a waistcoat, who I take to be Witt, sits with his back to us. The mother and the girl move slowly, as if dancing their parts in Witt's memory of them – we cannot point to anything that indicates we should read this sequence as a record of events independent of Witt's consciousness. Throughout the sequence birds chirp; in the background of one shot, Malick makes visible two small birds in a roughly made wooden cage, home made not shop bought; a close shot of them jumping around in the cage imparts significance to their presence. Images of birds, startled by the soldiers, flying freely in the jungle or dying on the ground, occur at points during the rest of the film; we should not leap to the conclusion though that these caged birds form part of a diagrammatic illustration of the relationship between freedom and captivity.

A shot of the girl's shoulders and chest follows, during which we hear a heartbeat accompanying Zimmer's music; then a shot of the girl pressing her ear to what may be Witt's chest – almost as if she's listening to, and the film is representing, Witt's heartbeat. Their clothes are faded and well worn, as is the patterned quilt on the mother's bed, suggesting the country not the city; Witt remembers his own pastoral family life while seeing what he perceives to be a harmonious familial and communal life on the island. From the shot of the girl hugging Witt, we move to a shot in which the camera pans and tilts from the bed, along the wall and past a clock, to the ceiling of the room, although there is no ceiling. The corner of the room creates a V-shape and the sky dissolves into a shot of the beach, the sea, Witt's canoe and then Witt sitting on the beach alone. Meanwhile the soundtrack interlaces Zimmer's serenely repetitive music with a heart beating and a clock ticking, the former alluding to biological cyclical movement and the other to manmade time. The interleaving of heart, clock and music coalesces as an intensely compelling moment that swells and expands into the depth of Witt's feeling and apprehension. The intertwining of images, music and sounds touches on memory, perception and time; allusions to death, Witt's remembering of his mother's death and his anticipation if not, in Jones' evolutionary terms, acceptance of his death, join with the film's

presentation of the unusual natural environment which confronts the soldier. Paul Hillier, describing the "fixed-state, non-narrative content" of Arvo Pärt's music as serving our need for rituals, writes:

The use of repetitive patterns and harmonic stasis suggests an awareness of time quite different from the materiality of Western "clock" time, though just as real to the person who experiences it. ... The ritual aspect of his [Pärt's] music derives both aesthetically and spiritually from its function as a sounding icon. The music ushers us into the presence of a recurring process: for ritual is not simply the repetition or re-enactment of structured events, but rather a return to a perennial condition.⁸

Malick merges the materiality of "clock" time with Witt's apprehension of his place in a process of recurring cycles: the details of the sequence – hands meeting, birds chirping, heart beating, clock ticking – create an apprehended rather than a represented scene; the swelling of Zimmer's music and the eloquent tilt of the camera combine with the dissolve from room to sky to implicate remembered past with experienced present and anticipated future. Appropriately, this interlacing of images and sounds precedes a change in tense in Witt's voice-over, from the current wondering of "I heard people talk about immortality" to his recollection of how he had wondered, in the past: "I wondered how it would be when I died. What it would be like to know that this breath now was the last one you was ever gonna draw. I just hope I can meet it the same way she did, with the same calm. 'Cause that's where it's hidden, the immortality I hadn't seen." And while the dialogue with his comrade becomes a ruminating interior monologue, the film presents Witt in a different time and place.

During Witt's voice-over about how he will meet his own death, the film cuts to a closer shot of the canoe, presumably from Witt's point of view, then to a shot of him standing, in a medium close-up, looking towards, although not at, the camera. Witt thinks about how he will meet his own death, yet when he turns towards the camera, his face and shoulders are relaxed and his eyes, although squinting at the glare, express no anxiety; his forehead is not creased and a trace of a smile hovers on his face. Throughout the film, Caviezel never allows Witt to show panic in his eyes, even up river towards the end; avoiding dullness or blankness, the actor keeps his eye movements steady, deliberate and assured. Typically, Caviezel walks as if he is out for a leisurely stroll on a farm at sunset, saying hello to a comrade who has been shot in the knee as if greeting a neighbour. The actor never produces an impression of fear, although neither does he allow us to imagine that Witt consciously suppresses a fear. He hopes to meet his own death with the same calm that his mother met hers, and he believes that the immortality that he has *not* seen is hidden in that calm.

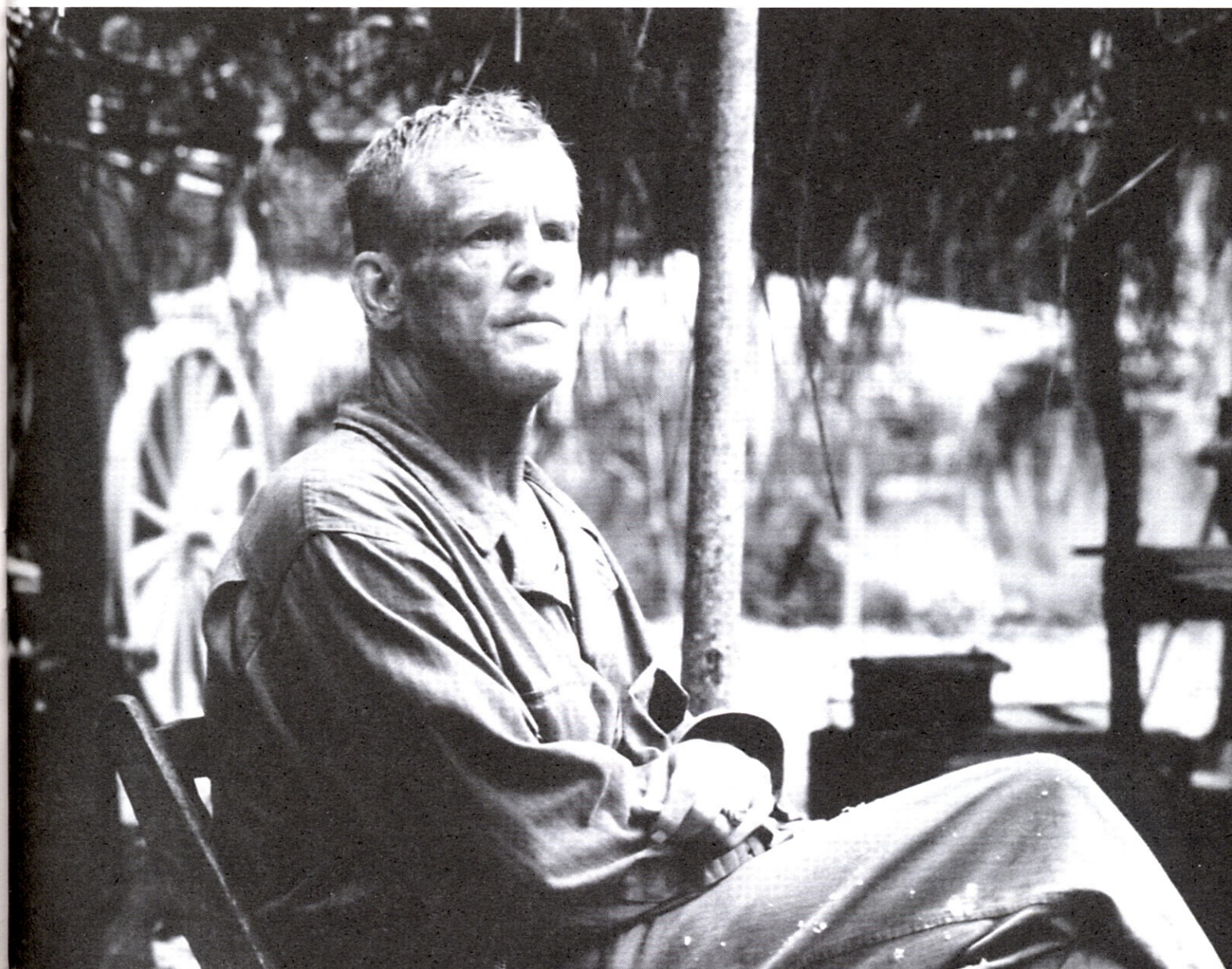
From the shot of Witt looking calmly towards the camera, we cut to a shot of an islander holding some shells, as the sea washes over his hand. Singing begins, a Melanesian chorus, and Malick shows us three children picking up stones on the beach. The singers clap a rhythm and we cut back to Witt as before with the three children in the background. The preceding shots are not point-of-view shots, but they are rooted

in his perception. As the singing gets louder and more celebratory, Witt looks for its source and Malick cuts to a shot of two islanders holding hands, filmed from behind. A new shot reveals Witt moving into the village, the music fading out slightly as he walks. We then cut to the shot/reverse-shot sequence of his conversation with the Melanesian mother holding her son. "Kids around here never fight", he observes; "Sometimes, sometimes when you see them playing, they always fight", she says, contradicting his idealistic perception. Caviezel is a handsome man and as Witt he smiles easily with relaxed warmth; unforced flirtatiousness colours their conversation about her baby and his appearance. Witt's comment about the lack of fighting points to a thematic contrast between the warring nations and the harmonious islanders, but the mother's contradictory words allow us to read the contrast as coming from Witt instead of Malick. A series of shots of Witt and his comrade observing and interacting with the parents and children of the village follows: a man shows Witt how to mend a roof; Witt's friend laughs with a group of women; both soldiers play with the children;

Witt bathes in the sea; a woman and her daughter cook over a fire; Witt watches a father and child through a doorway; finally, Witt watches a group of Melanesians walking and singing together. The last shot in this sequence, before his comrade notices the arrival of the American patrol boat, shows Witt standing on the beach watching the singers. Throughout these portrayals of domestic and familial life amongst the villagers, Witt maintains a sleepy smile on his face, calmly embracing what he sees. The shot of Witt on the beach watching the singers reproduces the framing from the earlier shot when his voice-over talks about remembering his mother dying; and, like that one, it supports the epistemic structure of the prologue, a sequence which ends with a shot of Witt looking over his shoulder. The next sequence, of First Sergeant Welsh talking to Witt in the Brig, begins with a long shot of the patrol boat at sunset – Malick is uninterested in conventional plot questions about how Witt and his friend were arrested.

The patterning of shots in the opening sequence becomes an analogue of Witt's own vision and experience: the match-

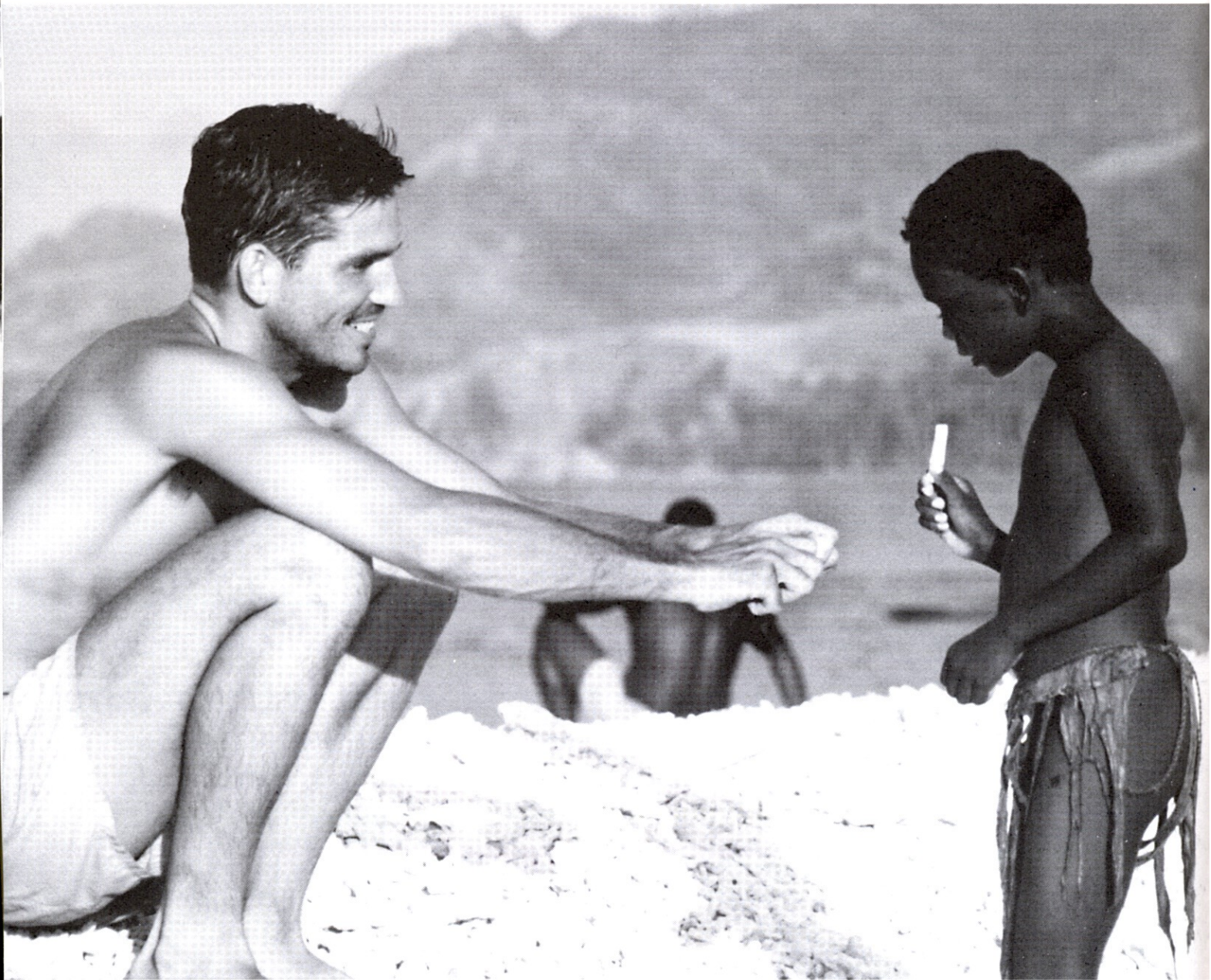
Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte)



ing of Witt's voice-over about his mother's death and his own death with his watching of families on the island is transformed into the connections that Witt feels: we view the experiences of this character with a powerful immediacy. The prologue does not offer us a single point from which we can begin to follow one story; it places together some of the story's themes, setting up Witt as one of its central focuses, opening with him and establishing his consciousness, yet providing no further information about Witt's feelings about his mother. The prologue presents the Pacific islanders' lives from Witt's viewpoint, signalled by the shot/reverse-shot pairs and by the integration of him thinking about his mother with shots of him observing and talking to Melanesian villagers, specifically a mother and her child. Gilberto Perez

reminds us that, "movies are a representation both of the world and of an apprehension of the world;"⁹ and Malick embeds Witt's apprehension of the island in the film's representation of it, but he deprives us of opportunities to state definitively where apprehension and representation separate. Folding and splicing together layers of time and space, Malick lets relationships and continuity emerge through patterning. Christopher Ricks, in discussing Austin's play on words with "the cats on the table", refers to "interesting filaments".¹⁰ In *The Thin Red Line*, Malick uses filaments to draw together elements that may seem disparate: at times, causal logic propels the story, creating local suspense (for example, the authoritative, Hitchcockian cut to the Japanese bunker with the machine guns after Staros says: "I'm sure the Japs

Private Witt (Jim Caviezel) with islander.



got something there to protect the approaches"); but the film's significance derives from its global strategies of using small pieces of linking matter to illuminate its themes.

Witt, AWOL on the island, retreats from the society of American civilisation represented by the army. Thematically, Witt's retreat from his daily environment into the natural beauty of the Pacific island develops as a search for a spirituality that Western civilisation lacks or has lost; it parallels the relationship between civilisation and wilderness that constitutes a vital theme of much American fiction. Yet, statements made or views shown are integrated into the overall film; for example, when Witt returns to the village after his experiences of battle he sees not the ideal familial community but only strife. Richard Poirier, in *A World Elsewhere*, observes:

Figures communing with nature abound in that [American] literature but they are essentially the same whether they seek purification from nature or try to impose their wills upon it. In either case they are enacting the same conviction, so pronounced in Coverdale [the central character in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*] that participation in society can only thwart the exercise of feelings that are most God-like.¹¹

Poirier notes that American literature – we might say American fiction – is full of images equivalent to the frontier. War films, like Westerns, with their images of a front line contested by competing forces, allude to America's frontiers, often affiliating the creation of an ideal self with the creation of an ideal nation. Malick's *The Thin Red Line* dramatises the Americans' fight against the Japanese on Guadalcanal, but it extends to more metaphorical borders and frontiers. The trailer for the film declares with a subtitle that the film is set on "Guadalcanal Island, 1942"; but Malick prefers to be more casual about the precise history of the battle of Guadalcanal, foregoing the possibilities for securing our relationship to the times and places represented and apprehended. We discover that the island is Guadalcanal only when Brigadier General Quintard briefs the officers on the ship and the film mentions no dates. Malick is an improvisational and intuitive filmmaker who often changes things on set and during post-production. Elias Koteas, who plays Staros, comments that Malick improvises a lot: when Malick discovered that Koteas had a Greek background, he incorporated this into the character and changed the Captain from an American Jew (Stein in Jones' novel) to a Greek-American Christian. Colin MacCabe criticises Malick for this change, arguing that it deprives the film of a potential to expose anti-Semitism in the American forces; but Malick is more interested in filming experiences that might be universal to soldiers in battle.¹²

Witt's participation in the attack on Guadalcanal is not a return to the wilderness, but his first visit to the Melanesian village constitutes for him a retreat from Western civilisation and warfare. Throughout the prologue, he wears only his shorts or trousers and his literal removal of his uniform functions as a figurative escape from society and its clothes, that is, its strictures about what one should wear and do, things that are often held in tension in American fiction with wearing nothing and doing what one wants. The social ordering from which Americans want to escape is represented in the nineteenth century novels of Henry James by Europe and England; civilisation and its strictures prove lethal for Daisy

Miller and devastatingly restrictive for Isabel Archer. The twentieth century finds that social ordering in American society itself, as do James' own twentieth-century novels. *The Thin Red Line* allows us to perceive Witt's comparison of the island's natural beauty and its inhabitants' life with the battle between two nations taking place on the island; but Witt's two experiences in the village imply that he sees only what he looks for: first, harmony amongst the villagers, and between the villagers and their environment; then, disharmony. When Witt returns to the village, during the week off the frontline, children run away from him, a group of men fight and he sees skulls piled in a hut, before he walks away in long shot, centre-frame, down a path into the jungle. Witt's varying experiences of the village connect with the doubts that Bell's "Dear John" letter retrospectively establish about his memory of his love for his wife, and with Tall and Staros' disagreement over how to attack the Japanese bunker, which derives from positions based on who sees better – Tall's decision to see the world from Staros' point of view is prompted by his realisation that a General is watching him.

The Thin Red Line evokes questions as basic and profound as whether human actions can affect the world, whether there is an external force that exists beyond our apprehension of the physical world, whether civilisation exists apart from the natural environment. Witt first voices his faith during his dialogue with Sergeant Welsh in the brig. Malick stages the scene so that it unfolds as an unusual impression of a Sergeant berating a Private. Throughout the scene, Sean Penn lowers the pitch of his voice at the end of each line, speaking as if sighing with resignation. He sits, speaks and walks slowly and deliberately, occasionally raising his eyebrows as he looks at Witt, softly asking rhetorical questions. He believes that he is in control, and he attempts to remain detached from Witt; but the intrigue of the scene emerges from the way in which Penn and Caviezel allow the emotional balance of power between the two men to bristle against the military hierarchy that ostensibly places Sergeant Welsh in the position of power. Welsh finds Witt bemusing and intriguing:

Welsh: You haven't changed at all have you Witt, you haven't learned a thing? All a man has to do is leave it to you, you put your head in a noose for him. How many times you been AWOL? You been in the army, what, about six years now? Ain't it about time you smartened up, stop being such a punk recruit? I mean, if you ever gonna.

Witt: We can't all be smart.

Welsh: No we can't. And that's a shame. Look at you. The truth is, you can't take straight duty in my company, you'll never be a real soldier, not in God's world. This is C Company, of which I'm First Sergeant, I run this outfit. Now, Captain Staros, he's the CO, but I'm the guy who runs it. Nobody's gonna foul that up. You're just another mouth for me to feed. Normally you'd be court-martialled, but I worked a deal for you. Oughta consider yourself lucky. I'm sending you to a disciplinary outfit. You'll be a stretcher bearer. You'll be taking care of the wounded.

Witt: I can take anything you dish out. And I'm twice the man you are.

Welsh: In this world, a man, himself, is nothing. And there ain't no world but this one.

Witt: You're wrong there Top. I seen another world. Sometimes I think it was just my imagination.

Caviezel's performance provides Witt with a sombre assurance that prompts Welsh, who looks surprised, to wonder where his assurance comes from, if it comes from his vision of "another world." The dialogue between them contrasts idealist and materialist, and Welsh concludes: "Well, then you've seen things I never will. We're living in a world that's blowing itself to hell as fast as everybody can arrange it. Situation like that, all a man can do is shut his eyes and let nothing touch him, look out for himself. I might be the best friend you ever had. You don't even know it." After Welsh leaves the cell, Witt's comrade observes "He hates you worse than poison"; but Witt disagrees: "I never felt he hated me, 'cause I don't hate him." Malick introduces an image of a man and a boy near a haystack; he then ends the scene with Witt's "I love Charlie Company; they're my people."

Richard Poirier argues that Emerson's idealism insists that "to lack of faith or belief is to be the reverse of worldly and practical."¹³ Pointing to the examples of Isabel Archer and Huck Finn, Poirier continues:

The illusion that society might someday, somehow be transformed by the vision and sacrifice of an Isabel Archer or the needs of a Huck Finn is necessarily among the things that their creators try to make the reader believe even when they themselves are sceptical.

Malick's presentation of Witt's vision and experience similarly challenges us. Suspended throughout *The Thin Red Line* is Witt's belief; yet, while indicating the transformative affect his idealism has on his comrades, the film's evaluation of that idealism remains purposefully undetermined. Poirier notes the scepticism of James and Twain in *The Portrait of a Lady* and *Huckleberry Finn*, but he also demonstrates their producing of "styles meant to sustain us past the glowerings of our own knowledge about probable failure." Malick never determines what Witt believes in, yet he convinces us of its importance; effectively, the film's style sustains us past our scepticism about Witt's belief.

The anticipation of battle prompts Witt's vision of his mother's death and his vision of "another world." The camera's tilt upwards towards the sky, out of his mother's bedroom, the dissolve from home to sea and the clock ticking produce a powerful reconciling of Witt's consciousness and the external fictional world in which the character sits. The film is concerned to communicate what belief might feel like in our world now; it is set in 1942 but the questions it provokes relate strongly to our ordinary experiences of the world. Allowing ourselves to acknowledge the depth of *The Thin Red Line's* questioning means allowing ourselves to acknowledge our own scepticism and question its foundations. Scorn for the questions that *The Thin Red Line* provokes, amongst them deep-rooted, universal questions about being and non-being, is in part a defence against or a refusal to acknowledge the relevance these questions can have for us. The film uses the experiences of soldiers during battle to ask questions that reach deeply into us: Why am I here? When and how will I die? What is my relationship to other people, other minds? If scepticism has dominated late twen-

tieth-century thought then *The Thin Red Line* challenges that scepticism, not to deny it or to disavow it, but to encourage us to acknowledge unanswered questions.

One theme of *The Thin Red Line* is the close relationship between soldiers which can apparently develop during battle, the feeling that they would die for their "brothers"; through this, the film dramatises both redemption in debasement and the transcending of the self. Nick Nolte says of this element of the film:

James Jones wrote a story about his own experiences in war, that men go into war not knowing why – they're usually indoctrinated to go in for idealistic reasons. Then they realise they're going to die or they're going to have to kill somebody and they become tremendously horrified. And in that moment of fright and horror, they literally lose their self. Something is replaced once that self is gone and that's this unbearable compassion of love. He said, after you feel that, and have lost your self, then you know you will die for your buddy. And he said, it's one of the strange ironies that come out of this terrible diseased idea, of war.¹⁴

Nolte's comments embrace the film's depiction of the complex relationship of a soldier to his comrades and of a soldier to the larger project of war. On the deck of the troop ship, after pressuring his subordinate to "crush them without mercy", warning that the Admiral will be watching "like a hawk", John Travolta's General Quintard comments to Nolte's Colonel Tall: "I guess we don't know the bigger picture though do we, if there is such a thing – what do you think?" Tall answers "I never ask myself that question"; but on the frontline, waiting to attack the hill, he asks Staros "how many men do you think it's worth, how many lives?" Awaiting sunrise, Tall quotes Homer's "rosy-fingered dawn" in Greek to Staros; and the film shows him to feel a strong connection to several "bigger pictures": his understanding of his place in a mythical tradition, learnt "at the Point"; his awareness, expressed to Lieutenant Gaff (John Cusack) and in voice-over, of having "brown-nosed the generals", degraded himself for family, home and career; and his recognition of the importance of Guadalcanal's military objective.

When Tall asks Staros how many lives it is worth sacrificing for "the bigger picture" he expresses the way in which the military benefits from the loss of self of which the actor speaks; but Nolte's description of the loss of self experienced by soldiers during battle also picks up on Emerson's idea of an "Over-Soul", a felt spiritual and transcendent link between us. Richard Poirier, demonstrating how Emerson influences so many American writers' work, writes:

Once the heroes in their novels discover that they are diminished rather than enlarged by efforts to participate in the massed power around them, they also find that they belong to a mysterious brotherhood of souls, a sort of Over-Soul of the lowly in which personal identities are lost and where all share a common destiny.¹⁵

Witt's period of absence without leave on the island figures within this American tradition of being outside society, yet Poirier argues that transcendentalism and romanticism are only two parts of this tradition. He notes that in Emerson's



Captain Gaffe (John Cusack, centre)

"Over-Soul" and Thoreau's "Nature",

"Individuality" becomes indistinguishable, from a social point of view – the point of view of most novelists, let us say – from anonymity. What happens to a man's body or his voice in the Over-Soul or within the movements of Thoreau's Nature is scarcely distinguishable from what happens to him when, in Dreiser, he is "being lived by something which needs not only him but billions like him in order to express itself."¹⁶

Malick's Witt exemplifies Jones' conception of the "evolution" of a soldier, the man who comes to accept the inevitability of his own death through sharing a common destiny and losing his self. Although *The Thin Red Line* is set during the Second World War, in 1942/43, one of its themes is consciousness and our connections to each other in the late twentieth century, the time Malick made it. I am helped to describe the film's presentation of Witt's belief by Paul Hillier's comments about Arvo Pärt's work and its bond with ideas about the transcendent in the cyclical, in particular the idea that we can achieve spiritual peace by immersing ourselves in nature, an idea that underlines Orthodox spirituali-

ty's distinction between God's "essence", which is unknowable and transcendent, and the "energies" by which in the world of phenomena we encounter God. Hillier hesitantly proposes:

The explanation, if there is one, is less important than the experience. A sense of individual insignificance is humbling, but also cleansing. Many writers have sought to express the view that if existence is understood to be linear in form, if every life and action is merely unique, then indeed our insignificance is bitter and tragic; but if the pattern of being is understood to be cyclic, then our moment of life becomes meaningful in all its brevity and aloneness.¹⁷

It may need re-stating that Witt's idealism is not the film's idealism; the film explores the relationship between spiritual and material values, focussing on a group while presenting the visions and experiences of individuals, some of whom are in conflict.

As I mention above, a key musical element of this exploration is Charles Ives' *The Unanswered Question*. Ives takes his title from a poem by Emerson called "The Sphinx", in which

a poet, in dialogue with the mythical beast, declares:

Thou art the unanswered question;
Couldst see thy proper eye,
Always it asketh, asketh;
And each answer is a lie
So take thy quest through nature,
It through thousand natures ply;
Ask on, thou clothed eternity;
Time is the false reply.

Devoted to Emerson and Thoreau, Ives composed *The Unanswered Question* for two orchestras, one that would represent the external material world, the other the transcendental spiritual realm. Wilfrid Mellers describes the piece as follows:

[M]uted strings, distantly playing immensely slow diatonic concords with virtually no temporal pulse, represent eternity and the unknowable mysteries. A solo trumpet becomes Man asking the "Perennial Question" in an angular, jagged, upward thrusting phrase: to which what Ives calls the "Fighting Answerers" (flutes and other people) heroically attempt to give answers. The string concords proceed implacably on their way, however; so the Fighting Answerers get increasingly distraught, bumping into one another in polytonal, polyrhythmic chaos until they end in despairful mockery of the trumpet's phrases. ...Though the unknown seers will not reply and the silence of eternity remains unruffled, Man's trumpet is undismayed. At the end it calls in its original form.¹⁸

As Mellers observes, Ives did not believe that man could ever reconcile the real and the transcendental realms, but he believed that it was our duty to attempt such reconciliation. In the piece, the strings provide a calm, stillness, while the solo trumpet introduces its dissonant questioning; Malick uses approximately the first two minutes of the piece, including only the first two reiterative trumpet calls, those which, to composer Ingram Marshall's ear, "allude to a bugle call: Taps".¹⁹ The director cuts Ives' music before the flutes add their more strident answering to the trumpets' questions; he then repeats the first minute, of strings only. The piece itself and its use are central to the themes of the film.

After Charlie Company take the bunkers and then the hill, they launch an attack on a Japanese base, overrunning it in a sequence that demonstrates the chaotic but efficient killing of modern weaponry; it shocks many of the American and Japanese soldiers into either open-mouthed bewilderment at their own actions or grief-ridden horror at the defeat and their comrades' deaths. As the attack on the Japanese encampment ends, a voice-over begins:

This great evil. Where's it come from? How'd it steal into the world? What seed, what root did it grow from? Who's doing this? Who's killing us, robbing us of life and light, mocking us with the sight of what we might have known? Does our ruin benefit the earth, does it help the grass to grow, the sun to shine?

At this point, Zimmer's score segues into Ives' *The*

Unanswered Question. As the voice speaks, the Americans organise the prisoners; Witt helps a prisoner sit up, putting down his rifle and clasping his enemy's shoulder. From there, we cut to a shot of a kneeling Japanese soldier being shot in the back at almost point-blank range by Private Dale, played by Arie Verveen. We have already seen Dale attack the bunkers and put a broken cigarette in his nostrils to block out the stench of death. Malick emphasises the contrast between Witt and Dale by having the amplified gunshot intrude on the soundtrack, while a man's screams nearby are unheard.

In the same shot, Dale walks towards the camera before it pans sharply down to a Japanese soldier brandishing a tiny pocket knife. The prisoner stands and waves it at Dale's face; the latter brushes him off then steps over the man he has just killed. In the next shot, Dale walks to a pile of dead and wounded Japanese near a muddy patch of ground. As he sits next to a wounded soldier, pulling him onto his back, the camera close in on them and the voice-over ends: "Is this darkness in you too? Have you passed through this light?" Dale threatens the wounded man: "I'm gonna sink my teeth into your liver." Throughout these three shots, Ives' sustained swelling of the strings builds in power. A closer shot presents Dale saying: "See them birds up there, they're gonna eat you raw", the second phrase of his line heard during an overhead shot of vultures swirling round the sky. As we return to Dale, he says: "Where you're going, you're not coming back from." He slowly waves his left index finger at the Japanese soldier, the rest of his hand holding a pair of pliers. The wounded man looks imploringly at Dale, saying something to him in Japanese. At this moment, the first trumpet calls out its lamenting question.

Collecting teeth from dead Japanese soldiers, Dale has been degraded by the war; as a voice-over states later, just before Dale, sitting in the rain, throws the teeth away: "War don't enable men, it turns them into dogs, poisons the soul." Modern warfare has indeed poisoned Dale's soul: with the dying Japanese soldier, Dale again puts cigarette halves into his nostrils, before counting his teeth. Behind him, the Japanese soldier kneels; the camera tilts away from Dale until the wounded man's face is centre-frame, turned towards the sky. A second shot of vultures circling overhead accompanies Ives' second trumpet call. When the film returns to Dale and the Japanese soldier, the latter has rediscovered anger and dignity – leaning over the American, he shouts at Dale. The American's response is to look away and turn over a body, pliers in hand, while a voice-over, presumably Dale's, asks: "What are you to me? Nothing." We then cut to a shot in a trench where one Japanese soldier grieves loudly over his dead comrade, cradling his body and rocking it back and forth; behind them, Bell looks down. A medium close shot of Bell watching them impassively accompanies the fade-out of Ives' music.

When Dale throws away the teeth, the film repeats a brief shot of the wounded Japanese soldier shouting "samamo" at Dale.²⁰ He then cries violently and hugs himself, as if in despair and remorse. Pointing to the humans as meat for the vultures, Dale compares himself with them when he threatens to eat the man's liver. Neither man understands each other's language and Ives' two orchestras echo their confrontation. Dale threatens to become as predatory as the vultures, wild dogs or crocodile that we see, though he eventu-

ally regrets his debasement and rids himself of his ugly mementoes. The contrast with Witt is instructive: war seems to "poison" Dale but to "enoble" Witt. The voice-over that precedes Dale's gruesome threat to the wounded Japanese soldier asks, "Is this darkness in you too?" In contrast, Sergeant Welsh asks Witt "You still believing in the beautiful light, are you?" The meticulousness with which Malick places this question rewards close attention. It comes during the series of scenes which leads to Witt's death: thus after Bell receives his wife's letter, we see Witt returning to the Melanesian village; Witt meeting his wounded comrade; Witt returning to base and talking to Welsh in an abandoned house; Welsh walking amongst his men at night; then, the scene of Witt's sacrifice and death.

Welsh is sceptical about Witt's belief in the "beautiful light", although to John C. Reilly's Sergeant Storm, he hesitates to confirm that scepticism as "numbness"; nonetheless, for the experienced First Sergeant, the war is about "property" and he will eventually, in a voice-over as George Clooney's Captain Bosche addresses the company, declare that "the only thing a man can do, find something that's his, make an island for himself." Despite this, Witt's assurance tests Welsh's scepticism, especially so in their last talk together before Witt dies. Witt returns from the village to the army camp, greeting several men warmly and then pausing to look at them with a tear in his eye, before mounting the steps to the old wooden house on stilts. As Witt reaches the raised veranda of the house, the camera pans left with him to reveal a drowsy Welsh reclining back on a chair, feet on a small table, pistol loosely in hand. Witt walks along the veranda and Welsh, taking his feet down, greets the private, asking: "Who you making trouble for today?" Throughout this shot, an empty birdcage, hanging from the ceiling, appears in the top right of the frame. In the same first shot of the scene, Witt circles round the empty house, talking to Welsh, the camera passing the cage on the extreme right. As Welsh asks "Why are you such a troublemaker, Witt?" the film cuts to a medium shot behind Witt as he doubles back past Welsh, the birdcage now on his left. A medium shot reveals Welsh leaning back on the wooden surround; a cut to a shot behind Witt follows him re-approaching Welsh, the birdcage again on his right. Witt's casual ambling around the veranda leads him into an empty room; the camera follows him in and as he looks up it leaves Witt and, in the direction of his gaze, tilts upwards to find a V-shaped hole in the roof that reveals the sky, criss-crossed with wooden beams. Zimmer's soothing repetitive music has been playing gently throughout this scene, but it swells slightly as the camera tilts; in addition, Malick adds the sound of waves breaking to the soundtrack as the camera looks up at the ceiling. When Witt comes out of the room he muses, "Lonely house, now." The camera's sharp upward tilt and the shape of the missing ceiling reprise the camera movement and V-shaped graphic from the remembered death-bed scene of the prologue; the allusion is slight but strong.

The reprisal of the camera movement and the missing ceiling accompany a reprisal of the motif of the birdcage. As Witt leaves the room, Malick cuts to Welsh, cigarette in mouth, still standing against the wooden surround. A shot then follows Witt down the veranda, moving away from Welsh for the third time, with the birdcage again on Witt's

left. Underlining its connection to the ceiling shot, the camera, instead of following Witt and passing the cage, as it has done before, pans left and frames the empty birdcage in a close-up, its door hanging open. Off-screen during this shot, Welsh asks if Witt is still "believing in the beautiful light"; and when Welsh finishes his question, Witt's fingers touch the base of the birdcage and his head enters the frame. Three shots follow this in a pattern of Welsh/Witt/Welsh, as Welsh leans against the surround and Witt walks towards him; the last contains enough forward tracking to consolidate it as representative of Witt's spatial point of view. During these, their conversation ends with Welsh asking, "How do you do that? You're a magician to me;" and Witt concluding: "I still see a spark in you." That the camera passes the birdcage four times before alighting on it independently and that Welsh asks Witt about the "beautiful light" at that precise moment emphasises its importance as a motif linking his thoughts of his mother's death with his acceptance of his inevitable death; the subtlety and slightness of this allusion strengthens the conviction that Witt's strength comes from this. Although Malick does not establish definitively that the birdcage and the ceiling mean for Witt what they mean for us, the placing of them, in a scene which dramatises the irresolvable differences between Witt and Welsh, between idealist and materialist, signals the approach of Witt's death.

Immediately after the "lonely house" scene, Welsh walks amongst his men at night; as he looks down at the sleeping Witt, a voice-over re-states his questions: "One man looks at a dying bird and sees nothing but unanswered pain, that death's got the final word, it's laughing at him; another man sees that same bird and feels the glory, feels something smiling through it". (This links to the shot of a dying bird that we see during the first assault on the hill, immediately after Tall shouts at Staros on the field telephone "come to life.") After looking at Witt, Welsh looks towards two men stamping out a small fire; a closer overhead shot concentrates on their dusty boots and the sparks flying; a slow dissolve, between the fire being extinguished and a river flowing, prepares us for Witt's imminent death. Witt is killed after he volunteers to accompany Fife (Adrien Brody) and Coombs (Matt Doran) upriver; sacrificing himself, he leads the Japanese away from the company. When trapped in a clearing, he invites death by starting to lift his rifle; that movement is accompanied by the sound of a wave breaking, its cresting and crashing climaxed with the noise of the rifle shot that kills Witt. As Witt falls, the film cuts to a shot of sunlight streaming through trees then a repetition of the underwater shots that accompanied Fauré's *Requiem* earlier; unlike before, Witt swims with the boys; the shot ends as Witt surfaces for air: Zimmer's music continues as the camera moves across a tree assailed by roots.

Simon Critchley writes well about Witt's death, contextualising it interestingly; he too emphasises Witt's discovery of calm and its connection to his awareness of the cyclical repetitions of nature, observing that, "central to Malick, I think, is this 'nevertheless' of nature, of the fact that human death is absorbed into the relentlessness of nature, the eternal war in nature in which the death of a soldier is indifferently ingested. That's where Witt's spark lies." Witt's belief lies in his apprehension of his place in nature's cycles, but "indifferently ingested" summarises Welsh's position, not

that of Witt or the film. Malick's film refuses such certainties; for instance, soon after Witt's death and burial, the film ends with words that echo Wordsworth. The poet, in *The Prelude*, confronted by the contrast of "the black drizzling crags" of the Alps and "the unfettered clouds and region of the heavens" affirms that:

Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light –
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.²¹

As the camera passes amongst the exhausted men on the troop ship and as Doll looks back at Guadalcanal, a voice-over asks: "Where is it that we were together? Who were you that I lived with, walked with? The brother, the friend." It continues: "Darkness and light, strife and love, are they the workings of one mind, the features of the same face?" Characteristically, Malick adapts the poet's certainties into a question that recalls the film's opening uncertainties about "this war at the heart of nature". Although, the film begins with Witt and ends soon after his death, it answers none of our questions – or Sergeant Welsh's – about how he feels what he feels, about the relationship between the real and the transcendental.

The birdcage forms part of a motif which, like the glass underwater in *Days of Heaven*, as Richard Gere and Brooke Adams drink wine in the river at night, stealing away from Sam Shepard, feels substantial yet fleeting. It exemplifies a key stylistic element in *The Thin Red Line*, though one that risks confusion. Malick edits together images and sounds so that a character's memory, experience and anticipation are woven into the depiction of a fictional world. Illuminating strands form larger expressive patterns, but viewpoint and meaning can appear unstable or obscure: one danger is that scenes appear as a jumbled montage; one reward is that a character's viewpoint can overlay a scene that we initially think we apprehend directly. Ruth Bernard Yeazell, in describing James' late style, notes the potential for bewilderment:

For like the characters, we too are continually forced to hover somewhere between ignorance and full knowledge, to struggle with intimations and possibilities which make themselves obliquely felt. The late style demands that at every point we sense more than we are yet able to articulate; only gradually do we grow fully conscious of our own subliminal guesses.²²

Malick's style ensures that the "tensions, complexities and ambiguities" of which Perkins speaks are fully embodied; we move fluidly from the film's account of Witt's experiences to Witt's experiences themselves; again to quote Yeazell on late James, "responsibility for the creation of meaning rarely seems so clearly fixed."²³ Malick films the visions and experiences of a group of men who may be losing their selves, he achieves involvement with the film and its characters while avoiding the traditional focus on individuals and he presents the unusual thoughts and feelings of the soldiers without establishing a consistent moral viewpoint on them. Ives' *The*

Unanswered Question figures as an emblem thematically and stylistically for Malick's approach: the film presents perspectives without resolving the relationship between them in favour of one or the other, whether it be Tall and Staros, Witt and Welsh or Dale and Witt. Authorial voice is felt; but there is an "absence of authority" in the film as to which viewpoint it privileges.²⁴

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Robin Wood's suggestions improved this article and I appreciate his input. Colleagues in the Department of Media Arts responded helpfully to a draft presentation of some of this material at our Graduate Research Seminar. Steven Marchant gave valued feedback and Tico Romao drew my attention to Jimmie E. Cain, Jr's work. I am also grateful to Michael Birdwell for sending me a copy of his conference paper on the film.

Jacob Leigh is the author of *The Cinema of Ken Loach: Art in the Service of the People*, London: Wallflower Press, 2002. He is currently researching a book on Eric Rohmer. He teaches film criticism and film history in the Department of Media Arts, Royal Holloway, University of London.

NOTES

- 1 V.F. Perkins, *Film as Film: Understanding and Judging Movies*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1978, first published 1972, p.155.
- 2 Simon Critchley "Calm – On Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*" *Film-Philosophy* 6:38, December 2002, <http://www.film-philosophy/vol6-2002/n48critchley>
- 3 Jimmie E. Cain, Jr, "Writing in his musical key": Terrence Malick's Vision of *The Thin Red Line* *Film Criticism* 25:1, fall 2000, pp.2-24.
- 4 Cain, Jr, pp.22, 23.
- 5 Paul Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, Oxford and New York: OUP, 1987, p.1.
- 6 See Program note by D. Kern Holoman <http://hector.ucdavis.edu/Handy/Notes/FauReq.htm>
- 7 Gabriel Fauré in a letter to R. Fauchois, Jean-Michel Nectoux, translated by John Sidgwick, Liner Notes to CD by Erato.
- 8 Hillier, pp.17-18.
- 9 Gilberto Perez, *The Material Ghost: Films and their Medium*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1998, p.225.
- 10 Christopher Ricks, *Essays in Appreciation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, first published 1996, p.267.
- 11 Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature*, London: Chatto and Windus, 1967, p.121.
- 12 Colin MacCabe, "Bayonets in Paradise" *Sight and Sound* 9:2, February 1999, p.13.
- 13 Poirier, p.150.
- 14 Nick Nolte speaking in "The Making of *The Thin Red Line*" on the Fox VHS.
- 15 Poirier, p.214.
- 16 Poirier, p.248.
- 17 Hillier, p.11.
- 18 Wilfrid Mellers, *Music in a New Found Land: Themes and Developments in the History of American Music*, London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1987, first published 1964, p.46.
- 19 Ingram Marshal, Liner Notes for *American Elegies* CD by Elektra Nonesuch.
- 20 I have not yet discovered what is said here or what it means.
- 21 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 1799, 1805, 1850, (eds) Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams and Stephen Gill, New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1979, Book Sixth, lines 635-640, p.219. The editors also point out that Wordsworth's affirmation of nature's unity itself alludes to Milton's description of God in *Paradise Lost*, V, 165.
- 22 Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Language and Knowledge in the Late Novels of Henry James*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976, p.35.
- 23 Yeazell, p.13.
- 24 V.F. Perkins, in a lecture on *Days of Heaven* (at the University of Warwick, 14 January 1991), spoke of the "absence of authority" in Malick's two earlier films: in *Badlands*, Holly's (Sissy Spacek's) voice-over is authoritative about events but not their significance; in *Days of Heaven*, Linda's (Linda Manz's) voice-over is not authoritative about events, their significance or people's motives.



The Purpose of Plot and the Place of Joan Bennett in Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window*

BY ANDREW KLEVAN

Fritz Lang's 1944 film is entitled *The Woman in the Window*, but in what sense is the woman *in* the window?¹ Assistant Professor Richard Wanley (Edward G. Robinson) views a painting of a woman in the window of a gentleman's club. When he returns to view the painting on leaving the club, he sees more than the painting of a woman, he sees the reflection of the woman in this particular painting (Joan Bennett). He sees her head hovering beyond the pane of glass, sidling up to her own portrait. Despite the inference of the film's title, the *real* woman is never 'in' the window, and the referential ambiguity of 'in' wittily suggests her elusive quality. In a film that consists

of the telling, or the showing, of Wanley's dream, it is appropriate that he should first see one of the dream's principal characters indirectly in two forms of replication – a portrait, a reflection – rather than experience her directly, as it were, in the flesh. The image of the reflection in glass – as distinct from the more precise reflection of a mirror – on a dark night, on a deserted street, renders the woman's appearance particularly indefinite. The translucent image reflects the prospect, but not the presence, of Alice's flesh; suspended before Wanley, she is beguilingly both there and elsewhere. She is held at arms length, seemingly reachable but ungraspable.

The film, however, does not go on crudely to present the ephemeral presence of the beautiful woman, the product of a man's dream, taunting him with her inaccessible flesh – as, perhaps, the reflection might. Nor does the film simplistically represent the woman as 'captured', or 'framed', or 'stilled' – as, perhaps, the portrait might. *The Woman in the Window* evokes and exploits elements of a genre – *film noir* incorporating a *femme fatale* – while avoiding too slavish an attachment to attitudes normally associated with it. For example, the film courts, and complicates, the conventions associated with the sexual seduction of males in film. In the light of Wanley's subsequent liaisons with Alice, the indeterminacy of the image suggests that the prospect of her body, but his inability to touch it, may provide a much needed, redemptive, flirtation. For Wanley, this prospect may not amount to a sexual frustration (maybe because the pleasures of companionship are freed from the pressures of consummation). The light suspensions of pleasurable flirtations might indeed be the desired cure for what Wanley calls, "this solidity, this stodginess I'm beginning to feel".

Which of his desires the dream fulfils, distorts, ignores or reflects is central to the film's swirling fascinations. The twist – "it's all a dream" – is not simply a contrivance, and unlike some twists of this sort, the previous action is not betrayed but enriched by the revelation. In retrospect, or on subsequent viewing, we experience the quality of a dream's aggressive logic, each detail of the story inevitably interlocking with others, ensuring a tightening grip around Wanley. At the same time, we also experience an uncertainty in comprehending the story, interpreting it now as dream, now as real. Yet, the dream is more than a canny exercise in compulsive plotting. Langian plots implicate the viewer as well as the films' characters and there seems to be a quality in Lang's best films that consists of beguiling the viewer with the irresistible lure of certain logical consistencies that nevertheless fail to amount to the whole truth. After Claude Mazard's murder (Arthur Loft), District Attorney Frank Lalor (Raymond Massey), in the gentleman's club, displays his ability to work out the plot (Mazard angrily interrupts Alice and Wanley in her apartment and Wanley stabs him with a pair of scissors). The fascination for the viewer at this point is that having viewed the events of the crime he can now hear them recreated by a character (the DA) who was originally not present. Massey deftly (and unwittingly) enacts a civilised torture as he (re) constructs the crime, his long and detailed account delivered calmly and deliberately. This process is somewhat akin to the *Columbo* paradigm: whodunnit suspense is discarded in favour of a gradual reassembling of the crime by the detective in conversation with the perpetrator who becomes inescapably suspended between assistance and resistance. The DA's description of the crime is mostly accurate, which ensures that one of his comments stands out: "Now these two people, this man, this woman, sit hating and fearing each other, wondering how long it will be before the other is caught and blasts out the whole story." The DA's expert exposition falters here because Wanley and Alice's relationship never develops, despite the pressure it is under, into one of "hating and fearing." The placement of the line is significant because it comes on the heels of his relentlessly perspicacious commentary. The DA's grasp of plotting is incapable, however, of closing in on the closeness developing between Wanley and Alice.

The DA's mistake acts as a warning for viewers to examine their assumptions about Alice. Bennett's performance evokes and plays against plot possibilities, and probabilities, which are suggested by conventions, generic and otherwise, and by this particular film. The first part of *The Woman at the Window* exploits our presumption that the woman will be a sinister character, using sexual provocation to pursue dangerous strategies. Alice approaches Wanley on the sidewalk in sequined black dress and hat, and she takes him back to her smart apartment, with its luxurious yet anonymous décor and ornamentation. Suggested here are two types of illicit, yet professional, sexual activity: the exterior, street pick-up and the interior, clandestine meeting. Alice says she saw Mazard "two or three times a week"; one might surmise that she was a "companion", or mistress, to a small number of rich men who supported her financially, rather than running a regular business. The ambiguity concerning Alice's occupation, or livelihood, is not merely a consequence of coyness encouraged by censorship constraints. The film fruitfully uses the censorship restrictions so that it may insinuate: improper sexual activity is emphatically implied to excite the viewer's suspicions.

In the short period following the killing of Mazard, Wanley begins to cover up the crime. Bennett's awkward and stilted movements suggest, at first, suspicious behaviour but then, as the scene develops, they indicate the genuine bewilderment and incapacity of someone who is unfamiliar with criminal activity. While Wanley cleans the scissors in the sink, we catch Alice's cautious approach through the open bathroom door. Her creeping movement may look devious, but perhaps she is simply hovering – like her reflection in the window – indicating an indecisive combination of curiosity and reticence. She is also caught between an eagerness to help and an anxiety about interfering, and she shows a justifiable hesitation concerning the extent of her involvement – both over responsibility for the killing and her capacity to help matters now.

The film soon inflects Alice's sexual suggestiveness by presenting it as friendly toying. Her teases are gentle, refreshingly matter-of-fact for the generic context and just allowing a hint of warmth. The test they set for Wanley is whether he will accept, or be capable of, the inducement to mutually beneficial flirtation, and be open in an anonymous situation, not whether he can resist the *femme fatale's* physical seductions. Consequently, she does not intend her costume to deceive Wanley (but it could delude the viewer). Her transparent chiffon top might be interpreted (transparently) as a strategic, or eager, sexual invitation. Yet, given our developing understanding of Alice's hesitant personality, her wearing of the top seems less purposeful and committed. Rather than producing an erotic suspension of her flesh between concealment and revelation, it may represent the way she is caught in ordinary situations between hiding and disclosing. It may allow her to trifle with an amiable mischief. Probably, she is seduced by the idea of appearing more provocative than she feels, while she seeks to seduce someone who, generously recognising her *design*, will prolong the flirtatious possibilities.

The scene in which Alice phones Wanley to congratulate him on his promotion begins with reminders of the crime. Wanley kneels by the fireplace at home and arranges his jack-



et, the one worn on the night of the murder, in preparation for its disintegration. This activity bleeds together quiet humiliation and quiescent anxiety: his task has mundanely brought him to his knees, while his fastidious folding keeps his fretfulness contained. Wanley's prodding of the jacket into the flames makes him obediently compliant with the dream's power to poke at his lurking fears about his disintegrating masculinity. His worries about his short stature, his social position and his capacity to impress while others are imposing on him, are all distilled. The Professor kneels like a washerwoman.

The phone rings and because the interruption occurs during this incriminating and shameful period the effect is one of disquiet and indignity (rather than simply of tension and alarm). Wanley says "hello" but the identity of the caller is not revealed and only after a delay (Wanley says, "How did you find me?") does the film cut to show Alice. She says, "have you seen the early editions?" but the threatening possibilities suggested by the question are belied by her casual attitude. The film continues to dwell on the ironies, mercilessly stoking Wanley's distress as he kneels ignominiously. Alice's voice is deliberate and velvety, and has a hint of slyness, as she says, "Your picture is in *The Times* . . . Congratulations." She goes on to clarify the purpose of the phone call by reading out the announcement of his promotion at the University.

The scene refuses, however, to rest its effect on a piece of black humour, which might flatter the audience's sophistication. Instead, it pushes the anxieties unleashed by the plot to the limit so that a moment of tenderness may unexpectedly emerge. The patterns established by the narrative are mostly cramping, and its movements seal and close in, so it is ironic that a piece of spirited sensitivity should here creep up on both Wanley and the viewer. The scene is further layered because of the ambiguity surrounding our assessment of Alice's affectionate approach. Has she cheekily insinuated an unnerving provocation into her benevolent phone call (while also making light, defensively perhaps, of a more perturbing exposure in the newspapers)? Alternatively, is she innocently excited by the good news and oblivious to the double meaning of her initial comments down the phone (and are her vocal fluctuations simply a playful, flirtatious technique that she adopts habitually and automatically to sustain the interest of men)? She might well be using the news of his promotion as an opportunity for kindly contact, and her face and voice, now softened, seem to show concern when she asks, "Did I frighten you?" Yet, the actress's address is inscrutable enough for us to contemplate whether it is wink or wonder that prompts the question.

Successful acting is often wrongly, or misleadingly, understood in terms of range. Joan Bennett has, like many of the great screen performers, a limited repertoire of characteristics that are nevertheless capable of developing an expressive rapport, and relevance, with the other elements of a film's style, and require only slight adjustment to adapt suitably to changing situations and differing moods. Alice has, for example, a characteristic stance that she tends to adopt at times of tension or on occasions when she is suspended. Before they have dealt with Mazard's body, she stands, often near a wall, or in front of the fireplace, with her hands placed behind her back. Sometimes she has her arms bent at her sides, her elbows slightly held back from her waist. This posture indicates a

reaching for composure, and a need to sustain her self-possession and (self-) awareness. Later, when Heidt the blackmailer (Dan Duryea) is in her apartment, the mantelpiece upon which Alice rests her elbows is just a little too high to lean against comfortably. Her wish to touch the mantelpiece indicates that she is, touchingly, looking for a little support, and requiring support while she is looking. For Alice, these tense suspensions are heightened versions of less fraught situations of waiting. Even in less critical engagements, her correct, straight-backed stance has just the hint of strain or stiffness, showing a slight uncertainty and effort. If only she could acknowledge openly her physical contrivances, release her resistance to relaxation, and invite intimacy.

Her invitations, such as they are, are delicate and tentative, slightly withdrawn and inhibited, because of intelligent apprehension. Bennett resists the demonstrative, or flamboyant, performances of the great actresses. She seems to be suspended between all the possibilities for an invigorating female existence on film. Using the terms of Stanley Cavell, I might say that she is without the complex qualities of unknownness (Garbo, Davis or Stanwyck), and without their invigorating eccentricity and confident transformative powers.² Nor does she seem calculating or artful enough to creatively pursue happiness within a couple (Dunne, Hepburn or Stanwyck): find a suitable man, whom she can suitably educate to educate her, and with whom she can then co-exist in a mutually nourishing, ongoing conversation.³ In *The Woman in the Window*, she is situated in an environment of manipulations, but denied the *femme fatale's* determined and shrewd capacities to ensnare (Stanwyck *again*). The risk for the Bennett performance is that it might appear prosaic or functional, possessing the superficialities of the beguiling *noir* woman – sultry, long brunette hair, slim figure, teasing costume – but without the flexibility of attitude that would enliven the conventions.

Bennett only suggests, however, that her portrayal of Alice is similar to her reflection in the window, a character of little substance. Bennett's unwillingness to embroider her moves, in a film which tends to exaggerate its progressions, makes her a crucial element in honing, and giving distinctiveness to, Lang's fictional world of dramatic compulsion. The risk for Lang's scenarios, in their search for, or concentration on, the potent fundamentals of human existence, is that their distillations will appear schematic and dramatically self-cancelling, or else oversimplified, naïve, possibly shallow, even absurd. Bennett checks the possibility of both the crude and the portentous in Lang's world by allowing the intensity in her personality to be found in modesty rather than in extremity. At the same time, despite the film's pronounced deployment of popular Freudian themes (dreams, sublimations, displacements), and an involved and complex plot, the dramatic presentation is direct and simple. Bennett's performance complements this approach: her quality of candour admirably refuses to complicate the fictional world with too much guile and intricacy.

Bennett's relatively guileless presentation of Alice opens up possibilities for the genre. What distinctive aspects can the Thriller, which usually thrives on the duplicitous, usefully interrogate in the candid? At significant points of crisis in the plot, Wanley and Alice crucially fail to adopt the melodramatic behaviour described by the DA ("Now these two people, this man, this woman, sit hating and fearing each other"). After

Mazard's murder, Wanley says to Alice: "We musn't quarrel. If we do that we are lost, both of us," and later, before he leaves with the body, he reassures her, "Don't worry – don't get panicky. I promise you I'll be back. I won't fail you." Wanley continues to show consideration towards her even in moments when we would expect him to feel betrayed, and angry, or at least overwhelmed by the desperation of his situation. When she reveals that she kept his pen, and that it has been found by the blackmailer, he softly replies: "it's done now." Alice asks, "Are you angry with me?" to which he replies, "No – I can't think of anything else you could have done." We view this exchange through high railings, as Wanley and Alice seem to enact a Sunday morning promenade after church service. Wanley is the clergyman, perhaps, dispensing kindness or taking the opportunity to have a quiet word with one of the congregants. The moment crisply combines elements of the merciful and merciless: his patient magnanimity towards Alice taking place behind bars. Before the scene where she attempts to poison the blackmailer, Wanley says, "I don't know what else we can do, Alice, but if you don't think you can go through with it – we'll try to think out another plan," and after her failure, Wanley comforts her with, "I'm sure you did all you could." The film is confident enough to risk losing, or at least dissipating, the tensions, and character conflicts, which are promised by these moments.

The film thereby explores a composed coping with crisis, without for a moment taking refuge, defensively, in cool. Edward G. Robinson gives a performance that avoids the conventional reactions of the male in thrillers. Wanley is forced into extreme actions (killing one man, trying to poison another), and continues to exhibit his anxiety concerning these actions, but Alice is not the sort of woman to agitate him into the masculine extremities characteristic of *film noir* – fervour perhaps, or indifference. The beguiling woman has not infected his psyche, and his behaviour is therefore not driven by the consequential male panic. Wanley's relationship to Alice does, nevertheless, rouse latent elements of his masculinity. His dream entertains an urgent, crisis-ridden scenario in order that he might experience it, and cope with it, with a woman who encourages an everyday or practical serenity. This is distinct from, but worryingly related to, the life with his wife that has resulted in an everyday and practical "solidity". At the same time, Alice stimulates him with the scent of the sexually attractive. She allows him to be gentle and mild mannered, without being dispassionate or unmoved.

To dream that a beautiful woman would be kind to you providing sincere occasions to be generous in return seems to be a sympathetic subject for a male reverie (although uncharacteristic of a murderous and claustrophobic milieu). On the other hand, Alice's invitations to friendship and Wanley's willingness to reciprocate even when his life is threatened may reveal that the peacefulness in his demeanour is a consequence of his ordinary docility, an undramatic pathology where the placid is accompanied uneasily by the sedate. The film is unusually reticent about what is being submerged by its characters. Wanley's patience is so consistently agreeable with situations that would seem calculated to promote selfishness that Robinson contrives to make his character appear particularly endearing. Consequently, the audience finds it less easy to recognise, scrutinise and disapprove of his deficiencies. Robinson's presentation of the psychological traits that ham-

per his character is unobtrusive because Wanley's relationship with Alice is founded on friendliness. The traits that are fundamental to his weakness also permit his affability.

The *film noir* thriller generously affords its performers the opportunity to enact a passionate melodrama. Yet, Wanley and Alice are inescapably tied to practicality, incapable, within their situations, of rising to intoxicating performance (even their instruments of murder are unusually mundane: scissors instead of a knife, or a gun, and sleeping tablets instead of arsenic). There is something precious about the odd presence of two characters with little capacity for exhibition within a scenario compulsively demonstrating (plans, schemes, solutions). One wonders, therefore, whether the film (the dream) stages calamitous circumstances so that it may distinguish the polite and quiet character of their relationship.

Wanley and Alice are linked with the unemphatic locales in which they exist and which fail to stimulate them. The woman in the window epitomises the presentation: inanimate Alice is caught in the portrait ("a good likeness") while at the same time her three-dimensional reflection floats unsteadily within the featureless display area. Alice is capable, of course, of a necessary, habitual role-playing but it merely complements, rather than enlivens, her vapid apartment. The apartment is dotted with anonymous, ornamental objects, and its clean and shiny surfaces give off an air of mock deluxe. Those invited into it are presumably conscious of their comfort, or luxuriate in an idea of expensively maintained comfort, although effortless relaxation is effectively disallowed and intimacy forbidden. The place where Alice engages in loveless relations is essentially barren, and its anonymity protects her, ensuring that she cannot be discovered, or known, through an assessment of it. Yet it probably also seals her in, surrounding her with a lifelessness which stifles self-discovery, and continues to confirm her own inhibited assessment of herself.

Alice and Wanley are conscious of their separateness in everyday experience. They suffer the ordinary inhibitions of reasonable people, and the confinements they experience in the dream plot are a distorted version of the regulations they experience in their everyday life. The dream intensifies the uneventful encroachments by their apparently supportive companions (for Alice, Mazard, and other men perhaps; for Wanley, his family, and the men in the gentleman's club). The extremities of the plot alert us to their routine concerns. Before Wanley lifts the body of Mazard to his car, Alice must check to see if everything is "all clear" and the camera pans and tilts as she surveys the deserted street. Echoing her lonely life in the apartment, she is forced to stare into emptiness and hope for more of it, so she is not discovered or found out. The dream uses thriller anxieties to amplify everyday worries.

Considering that the dream is Wanley's, there is a peculiar pattern of activity from the viewing perspective of Alice: we see Mazard fall to the floor from her optical viewpoint; she looks out from her apartment door to see an anonymous man ascending the stairs seemingly to another apartment (and he looks back at her); and we watch as if with her, through the outer glass doors of the apartment building, as Wanley puts Mazard's body into the car. The pattern is a continuation of the woman suspended in the window: Alice lingering at thresholds, or in peripheral spaces, or in-between, against mantelpieces, chests of drawers, walls, and doors. That the dream allows Alice's apartment to be occupied by men is per-

haps unsurprising. It is more telling that she must watch, from the sides, as they scrutinise this seemingly vacant space for possible significance, stories that might be read into it. Both Wanley and the blackmailer attentively move around it and imagine what might be interpreted as incriminating evidence. Every time the blackmailer plucks out a tiny but devastating sign of murderous goings on, an impassive location whose purpose is to reveal nothing discloses precise and pertinent information. The pointed exposure of the clues in the plot, which a particular character may find especially worrying, is an analogy for the discovery of sensitivities that lie beneath modest or apparently untroubled human exteriors.

The film also uses Alice's interaction with the characterless décor to indicate unassumingly her own self-effacing affections and enthusiasms. Alice's congratulatory phone call is again significant here because of her changes of posture on the neatly made double bed: she bounces over onto her stomach to read the information in the newspaper, and she rolls round again, bending back her arm and putting her hand between her head and the pillow. These easy-going movements show her comfortably absorbed both by Wanley's news and by her phone call with him. They have a genuine authenticity on a double bed that, in contrast, seems to be glossily manufactured for public acceptance and, typically of her apartment, is an ample reminder of her solitariness. There is a humble pathos to Alice's movements because they are contained within the moment's more prominent concerns: the phone call ensures that her relaxed postures occur at a moment when she is necessarily separate from Wanley, and the already discreet indications of her warm-heartedness, seen only by us, take place within the solitude of her showcase apartment.

These informal positions contrast to the tense postures she is forced to adopt while in the presence of others. When the blackmailer first arrives at her apartment, she stands at a right angle to him, refusing to look him in the face, and crosses her arms defensively in front of her waist. She fixes herself and the flaccid snake, slithering around her, takes advantage of her unbending self-protection. He conducts his meticulous search while maintaining a lackadaisical, languorous posture. He crosses one leg under the other as he perches on her couch, then swings smoothly around on her dressing table stool. Later he nonchalantly outstretches his whole body deep and low to sink into the armchair, all his muscles slackened. Dan Duryea's performance is not merely one of slippery pantomimic villainy, however, because he is both lubricious and pointed.

The scene where she attempts to poison him is one of those exacting movie sequences in which a character's behaviour comes under unusual scrutiny because the viewer is nervously alert to a specific task that needs to be accomplished. The problem for the film here is to ensure that the plan to poison the blackmailer fails, without making Alice look incompetent, or undermining her. The scene must credibly maintain the possibility of the plan's success, and the possibility of this particular woman achieving it. At the same time, the viewer must not be too fixed on a successful outcome because of the need to be attuned, throughout the scene, to the intelligence and sensitivity exhibited in her failure. The purpose of the plan is hindered by her hesitant postures: they indicate the self-consciousness which allows her to manage a

contained composure, but which also make it impossible for her to surrender fully to the performance of a role. At one moment, as they both sit in armchairs next to each other, Alice attempts to look silky and slinky through arching her upper body, while her close-fitting, cream dress accentuates the fluid curves of her figure. On his suggestion that she come away with him, she quickly straightens her back, and reverts to a stiffer posture, indicating that she cannot continue to be *smooth*. Later she puts her knee on the arm of the chair, and bends over him in a further attempt to be seductive. Alice finds herself in a typically awkward suspension, a physical encapsulation of her overall pose in the scene that is sufficiently perfunctory to ensure that she is always uneasily poised. She slides her hand from his shoulder, and down his reclining upper body that is enveloped in the armchair. This long descent draws attention to the necessary effort of her caress, slightly halting, and a touch too careful. The laziness of his languid contours, and their proximity, unavoidably prompts her upright alertness.

As well as contrasts between the characters' positions, there are also echoes. The blackmailer's undulations around Alice can be seen as a distorted mirror to her own slidings around the periphery of her apartment after the killing of Mazard. This is akin to suddenly recognising, privately, patterns of behaviour we share with those we dislike or consider more extreme than ourselves. The suppression of criminal guilt soon bleeds into other shameful concealments, and Alice is insidiously incriminated. While all occasions or incidents seem irretrievably bound up in the plot's necessary and linear flow, they also have a less apparent function, making telling connections across the narrative. Alice and Wanley are mysteriously related, especially at points when they are separated. An explicit incident happening to one of them may allow the significance of an associated event, one that is perhaps less stressed, to come into view. Both the blackmailer and the DA have a "lean and hungry" look, and both enact an effortless scrutiny within the rhythms of loquacious patter. They provide different inflections on the respectable invasiveness of masculine investigation and inspection, all the more unnerving for being physically and verbally lucid. The blackmailer's manoeuvres rhyme with the DA's coaxing of Wanley in the men's club: the DA entices him from the dining area to the lounge, his revelations about police procedure flowing as effortlessly as the social procedures of the club. As the blackmailer takes advantages of the apartment's comforts, so the discomfort of Alice increases, and the DA unwittingly does something similar, though less overtly sinister, in the club with Wanley.

In a more jocular vein, both wear the straw hat which in turn rhymes them with Mazard who also wore the same style, and whose hat Wanley is forced, after the disposal of the body, to keep close for longer than he would like. Outside the dream, Mazard is Charlie, the man who looks after the hats and coats in the gentleman's club, and who returns Wanley's own hat at the end of the film. By rhyming diverse and anomalous characters who are ostensibly in tension with each other, the film makes connections and show similarities between apparently different traits. The connections are obscured for Wanley and Alice, and rarely emphasised for the viewer, so the film proffers a delicate synthesis within an overwrought situation. The rhymes never become too neat, or

arch, because the film – suitably in accord with Alice's first appearance – creates a network of indefinite reflections.

Alice's apartment and the gentleman's club are apparently restful spaces, which allow ease of movement (for men), but which are nevertheless constricted by the ritualistic. The DA, Wanley, and the Doctor (Edmund Breon) stroll from room to room in the club, from dining hall to lounge, ensuring that the continuation of the DA's story is carefully paced: "Would you like to figure how the police reckon it happened," he says at the dinner table and then invites them, and leads them, to the lounge. The dream plays on the "stodginess" that Wanley says he feels by placing him within a series of accommodating social movements that are at the same time restrictive. The cut to his right hand by the barbed wire fence, means that when he greets the DA or the Inspector (Thomas E Jackson) he must put out his arm coyly with his palm downwards, as if he were a woman diffidently presenting his hand to be kissed. He is unable to engage in that assertive, and yet ordinary, male ritual of engagement, firmly shaking hands, and his already shrinking approach to the male world is further feminised. (Perhaps, these feminine aspects allow him to dream up the sympathetic portrait of Alice.)

The barbed wire cut already harks back to the occasion, in Alice's apartment, when Wanley sliced his hand on the wire round the cork of the champagne bottle. The incident appeared both straightforward and unusual: although in real life such little injuries are expected, in Hollywood films corks usually pop with ease. Robinson manages such awkward gestures without being cack-handed or pathetic; like Alice, he bears himself intelligently and with dignity, remaining steady even when burdened (another version of his "solidity" and "stodginess"), and does not behave like a clumsy wreck. His character is consistently balanced while the plot pushes to extremes, and rather than making him appear useless or incapable, the film maintains the sense of the dream exploiting his ordinary worries and deficiencies.

Wanley's stocky build reinforces his steadiness while the litherness of the DA, the Inspector, and the blackmailer enhances their elasticity, pliant in spite of the regimentations with which they are presented. Wanley is not forced to return to the scene of the crime, but coaxed by chumminess the night before at the club. As he gets close to the scene of the crime again, and delves further into the bushes, there is sense of life closing in on him, coupled with the feeling that it has all the time in the world to do so. The Police Inspector says, "There is one thing we have in our Department that is really worthwhile – patience." The police department gives Wanley plenty of time, but this serves only to taunt him with his own inability to make use of it. The calmness of the claustrophobic approach enables the film to fashion its allegory about the narrowing of a man's life.

The film is a penetrating study on being "close", each variation informing the others: being close to the scene of a crime, being close to poisoning someone, being close to solving a crime, being close to sleep, being close to death, being close to male companions, being close to a woman. Whereas the men close in on Wanley, the woman is close to him; the men enjoy processes of scrutiny, but Alice and Wanley never interrogate each other; the men's attachments are based on searches for knowledge, whereas Alice seems to be somebody simply to be with (or to be with simply). When Alice realises that the black-

mailer has been killed and all their troubles are over, she does not embark on any great celebration, but rather immediately runs to telephone Wanley with the good news. This generous impulse might be a delightful denouement to his dream, except he fails to answer the phone and appears to have already poisoned himself. He is slumbering towards death, and within the dream Alice fails to awaken him. Ultimately his "solidity" disallows him from responding to this woman, so she cannot rescue him. Nor can he rescue her – from a life of weak roles performed for men. (The name Wanley evokes a weak surrendering: "Wan": pale, worn, weak, giving the impression of exhaustion. The adverb is Wanly (without the "e"). Alice, incidentally, may or may not exist in a "wonderland", but as the woman in the window, she is first sighted through a "looking glass"). His revival – along with the pseudo-revelation that the events are a dream – afford the viewer a small degree of relief, or rescue, at least from the tensions created by the plot. Unfortunately, the moment when he wakes from the dream is precisely when we become resigned to a life surrendering to sleepiness.

We are also likely to feel regret at the disappearance of Alice. Joan Bennett is the only major performer in the dream not to have a role outside it. It is an unconventional achievement of the film that it uses a man's dream to create a perceptive portrayal of a woman. She rhymes with, and reflects, the sensitivities of her male dreamer, but this is what generates the sensitive characterisation. Before Alice learns of the blackmailer's death, she lies diagonally across her double bed on her stomach, face down, her head nestled between two pillows. (We see her affinity with Wanley, even while they are separated: she succumbs to her bed, as he does to his armchair.) The position of her body stretched out on the silky sheets allows the film a moment to display, and dwell upon, her slimly attractive figure; yet it is a body that appears worryingly still, and with her face hidden, she seems finally fully smothered, suffocated even, by her environment. This view of Alice, isolated on a double bed, shows how the film hints at sexual possibilities while in fact developing a tender moment of disappointment. This is typical of the film as a whole, generously aligning itself with Alice's inability to exploit her sexuality with the blackmailer or to integrate it satisfactorily into her life. Wanley's comic scarper from a freakish incarnation of Alice at the very end of the film is not merely an epilogue gag. The incident may provide more penetrating instruction: it is precisely not Joan Bennett from whom he flees, but the enticement of plots involving vulgar cartoons of female allure.

Andrew Klevan is lecturer in Film Studies at The University of Kent at Canterbury where he teaches a course on female performance in Hollywood cinema. He is author of *Disclosure of the Everyday: Undramatic Achievement in Narrative Film* (reviewed in *CineAction* No.57). He is currently completing a book entitled *Film Performance: From Achievement to Appreciation to be published in 2004*.

NOTES

- 1 This piece has benefited from the generous attentions of Edward Klevan, Vivienne Penglase, Douglas Pye and Jill Hollis.
- 2 Stanley Cavell, *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
- 3 Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (London: Harvard University Press, 1981).

The Age of Innocence

MARTIN SCORSESE, 1993

BY DEBORAH THOMAS

Scorsese's *Age of Innocence* is a film about the constraints of social class, and the antecedents which Scorsese cites are costume melodramas with either a distinctively American setting – *The Magnificent Ambersons* (Orson Welles, 1942), *The Heiress* (William Wyler, 1949) – or an Italian 'operatic' opulence – Visconti's *The Leopard* (1963), for example – rather than any leaner or more sinewy thrillers, say, where members of one economically exploited class commit crimes against members of another. The 'crimes' in Scorsese's film are much subtler and less overt – indeed, even invisible to those who commit them unawares – and in no way a conflict between classes or a breaking of the law. Rather, they are no more than perceived affronts to the moneyed classes from within. Though servants are certainly in evidence throughout the narrative world, they present themselves as largely silent presences at the edges or in the background of the frame, with little individuality or voice, often entering the frame as no more than a gloved hand delivering a letter on a silver tray or setting an immaculate plate of food in front of a guest at one of the many dinners that punctuate the film. So this is a film about the excessive self-regulation of the wealthy and leisured in old New York who are generally alert to the most minute and nuanced deviation from their hierarchies and governing rules and who, rather than being embarrassed by others' transgressions, take perverse satisfaction in uncovering such deviations and closing ranks against them.

The film begins in silence and darkness: the screen is completely black for a full seven seconds or so before the first of the opening titles appears, though deep and resonant strings begin to play midway through. In a film whose visual world is so full of rich colours and beautiful surfaces, the fact that it emerges from such darkness is significant, and, much as servants and servitude can be seen to hover round the periphery of this world, so too will we notice pockets of darkness at its

edges or within the frame, threatening to encroach on the characters in many scenes throughout the film, particularly in more private moments located to one side of the public social stage. For the moment, after the opening few titles, what we see but cannot quite read is ornate old-fashioned writing – perhaps of passages from Edith Wharton's novel – in rich blue script on the black surface of the screen. A pink flower appears through the script and opens by means of time-lapse photography, with another flower inside it, overlaid with lace. As the outer flower and superimposed script disappear, the inner flower opens (with lace again covering the flower and blackness remaining outside its edges). The sequence continues as one lace-covered flower replaces another, the tempo suddenly speeding up and the flowers becoming increasingly overblown, with the speed of their unfolding hinting at an over-eagerness for immodest self-display, until the screen is entirely filled by an opening flower overlaid by lace. Where before there was some ambiguity as to whether the flower was overlaid by lace, or the lace by the flower, now it is clear that we are looking through the lace – with lacy flowers as part of its pattern – to the real flowers behind.

We hear a woman singing an aria from an Italian-language version of *Faust* and, as the flower opens behind the lace, the image dissolves to another very different flower, resembling a dandelion that has gone to seed, opening like a white fan against the darkness which fills the upper part of the frame, with the words, "Directed by Martin Scorsese," over the flower. The credits fade to black, then fade in to a screen completely covered with yellow flowers and, written across this, the words, "New York City, the 1870's." In contrast to the heavily stylized and blatantly artificial credit sequence, these flowers seem, at first, to be part of a real garden. The woman's voice continues to sing and a hand enters the frame to pick a flower, but, as the camera moves right, we see that the singing voice

The Countess Olenska (Michelle Pfeiffer), precariously positioned in the upper echelons of old New York.



and reaching hand belong to one and the same figure, who is in costume and in heavy make-up on stage. The camera moves in on her and emphasizes her harsh, almost grotesquely made-up face, then cuts to an empty screen. The rest of the opening scene at the opera will be dominated by the idea that the audience is as much on show as the singers, and as much in costume, with numerous shots of details of jewelry, buttonholes, hair ornaments, and dress. The grotesqueness of the singer's face when looked at from too close up suggests that the privileged members of the audience as well are wearing unattractive masks which are not up to close scrutiny, though this implication will not have its full pay-off until much later in the film.

We now move left from the empty screen whose darkness turns out to be part of the narrative world itself, rather than a purely cinematic effect, and onto a white rose in someone's buttonhole, the camera moving up to the face of Newland Archer/Daniel Day-Lewis against the rear wall of his box. The immediately following cut to a shot of the conductor with the audience behind him as the camera moves from left to right across them from the point of view of the stage connects Newland to the audience on show. Shortly afterward, as we cut back to Newland, we see him move forward in the box and sit down with a group of other men, one of them, Larry Lefferts/Richard E. Grant looking through binoculars as much to study the rest of the audience as the stage. Along with Lefferts, we see Ellen Olenska/Michelle Pfeiffer, who is newly returned from Europe after the collapse of her marriage and now seats herself in a box with Newland's fiancée May Welland/Winona Ryder and May's mother, Mrs. Welland/Geraldine Chaplin. A reaction shot shows Lefferts lowering his binoculars as the camera moves in on him and he utters the single word – "Well!" – with a combination of indignation and smug gratification, passing the binoculars to Sillerton Jackson/Alec McCowen beside him. As Sillerton gives the barest hint of a smile and hands the binoculars back to Lefferts, the two men engage in petty gossip and speculation, while Newland turns his head slightly and takes it all in with evident displeasure. As a show of support for his fiancée and her family, Newland leaves the box and passes through the lobby to join the women in their box opposite. Although we initially seem to be given a point-of-view shot as a servant hurries to open a glass door in Newland's path, it is clear when Newland enters the frame from further to the left – and also from the way the camera glides before us – that we are being invited to accompany him, but then to hold back as he moves off in front of us, rather than to occupy his place.

Indeed, both the credit sequence and the scene at the opera encourage us to keep our distance from any of the characters by layering upon their actions a self-conscious camera rhetoric which provides us with a perspective that the characters completely lack. We have already observed how the sequence associates the beauty of the richly coloured flowers with the idea of over-ripeness, an association with excess which is extended much later in the film with references to fever. For example, one of the Blenker girls in the Newport sequence has been left home from a party because of a fever which appears to have heightened her complexion and gives her a combination of languor and over-heated vivacity as she talks with Newland, while Mrs. van der Luyden/Alexis Smith later warns him against travelling to Naples because of a fever which is raging

there. So fever brings colour to the cheeks but is absolutely to be avoided, at least according to one of the film's main arbiters of propriety, and, in the case of both these references, feverishness is linked to Newland's attempts to chase after Ellen (first at the Blenker house and then – in Newland's thinly disguised travel plans, which never materialize – in Europe).

The title sequence may also be taken to refer more specifically to Ellen, who is seen as mildly scandalous due to the display of her European marriage, and is, herself, a beautiful flower somewhat immodestly displayed. More particularly, the shot of lace covering the entire screen, including the flower behind it, anticipates one of the most beautiful shots of Ellen, seen through a veil when, after the scene at the Blenker house, Newland seeks her out in Boston. The images of flowers overlaid with lace, as well as the more particular image of Ellen wearing a veil, provide representations of nature overlaid with culture – of repression, in other words – whose implications extend to almost everyone in this class-bound world, but, most poignantly, to Newland and Ellen. Along these lines, in the scene of Ellen veiled, Newland reveals that, despite his recent marriage, his feelings for her are as strong as ever. As they take tea (her veil now pulled back), Newland complains bitterly, "You gave me my first glimpse of a real life, and then you told me to carry on with a false one. No one can endure that," to which she replies, "I'm enduring it," as she lowers her face and eyes (thereby imposing another sort of veil, though a more 'natural' one). This opposition between what is real and what is false was there in the opening sequences we've already looked at as well, though the terms were more ambiguous and harder to disentangle there (with what appears to be a real garden turning out to be fake) than Newland's words now seem to imply.

Such is the power of the repressive forces at work that many characters are in continual danger of congealing into objects (as when May's hands are modelled in Paris and turned into stone, or when Newland comes upon Ellen being observed and painted without her being aware of this as she sits and reads on a bench in Boston Common). Passions are so thoroughly regulated that they barely cause even a momentary ripple on the gleaming surfaces of this world. Thus, at one point, when Ellen cries and Newland tells her gently, "No, you mustn't," she replies tartly, "Does no one cry here either?" The final shot of the title sequence – the white flower gone to seed, which opens gracefully like a fan – may suggest ironic anticipation of Ellen's fate as a woman past her prime at the end of the film (though we never see her as such, since she remains offscreen).

This link gains further strength by Ellen's use of her fan in the opera scene as she extends her arm and sweeps the closed fan across the audience laid out before her, confiding in Newland with delight, "How this brings it all back to me." She soon adds, with no sense of the malice which surrounds her nor the unintended irony of her words, that she's been away "So long, I'm sure I'm dead and buried and this dear old place is heaven." As she fans herself and speaks these words, the camera closes in on her and a dramatic drum roll begins, as if to undermine their misplaced optimism. The film cuts to the drum as the camera moves in and then rises to the stage, where Margherita is being pursued by Faust. After a dissolve to a view of Margherita facing the offscreen audience to our right, with Faust behind her, the camera approaches her, then moves around her to her rear, pulling back, waiting, then rushing

forward towards the audience so that they alone are visible as the duet comes to an end. The way the stage performance of the opera is whipped up into cinema by this virtuoso shot (and others) and the way this cinematic discourse leads to performers and spectators changing places, so that we end up looking at the audience, as the aria comes to an end, and not at the performers on stage, both privilege Scorsese's perspective and invite us to share it. This invitation is sweetened by the pleasures promised to us by the camera's weightless freedom of movement so far, in contrast to the solidity of the film's narrative world, which is weighted down by both tradition and its material substance (jewels, clothing, food, décor, and so on), Scorsese himself commenting on the film's presentation of food, for example, as "just one more detail which is a sort of rock holding Newland Archer down" (p.188, *Scorsese on Scorsese*, David Thompson and Ian Christie, eds, 1996, London: Faber and Faber).

At this point, however, just as we have got used to the way Scorsese's camera presents itself to us as guide and commentator on this glittering world, the film cuts to a shot of a woman standing up in her box, and the film's extended use of voice-over narration – an unsuspected prospect until now – commences, providing us with an alternative guiding hand:

It invariably happened, as everything happened in those days, in the same way. As usual, Mrs. Julius Beaufort appeared, unaccompanied by her husband, just before "The Jewel Song." And, again as usual, rose at the end of the third act and disappeared. New York then knew that a half-hour later the Beauforts' annual opera ball would begin.

Though the narrator who speaks these words may be taken to be more or less equivalent to Wharton's narrator in the novel, who, in Scorsese's words, "seems to be standing apart and observing events" (p. 185, *ibid.*), the fact that it is Joanne Woodward who supplies the voice not only makes her femaleness explicit, implying perhaps a merging with Wharton herself, but colours her ironic tones with considerable warmth and compassion, especially in the later stages of the film. In the move from novel to film there are also, inevitably, omissions and elisions which delicately shift the focus of the narrator's concerns. Thus, in the passage from the film, quoted above, the novel's explanation of Mrs Beaufort's presence at the opera when she is on the verge of lavishly entertaining at home – "in order to emphasize her complete superiority to household cares, and her possession of a staff of servants competent to organize every detail of the entertainment in her absence" (p. 19, Penguin edition, 1974) – has been left out, suggesting that money may be less thematically important as an underpinning to social standing than is apparently the case in the book. Similarly, a more explicit concern with the pastness of these events, thus distancing us more fully from the lives laid out before us, has been incorporated into the film through the added reference to the way things happened "in those days," rather than maintaining the livelier sense of an up-and-running society with habitual and oft-repeated events which would have been conveyed by the references to things happening "as usual" in the book.

All of these complications mean that behind Woodward's discourse as narrator in the film are the ghosts of other discourses (like the ghostly indecipherable script in the opening

credit sequence) – that of Wharton's narrator, of course, and, less discernible behind this, that of Wharton herself – while Scorsese's camerawork, editing, and *mise-en-scène* provide us with another overarching 'voice' whose relation to Woodward's narration will need to be explored. At the centre of these various competing discourses, and complexly embedded within them, are the characters themselves, who, because of this embeddedness, become objects of our curiosity and investigation rather than surrogates for our own imaginative relationship to the narrative world. Of course, even amongst the characters there are significant differences of perspective, awareness and tone, with some much more ironic and amused than others (Larry Lefferts, say), some more appalled at what they see and experience (most obviously, Ellen), and others humourlessly bound and committed to the professed aspirations and values of their shared social world (May, certainly, but also, at least in the beginning – one might also say, at least in the end – Newland himself, despite his brief fantasy of rebellion).

The Beaufort ball is the first of a series of social events unfolding one after another which the narrator talks us through, several of them accompanied by elaborate long takes as if the narration has somehow managed to call them up, the camera's revelations providing us with both an illustration of the narrator's words and, at the same time, an alternative visual narration slightly to one side of them through a process of detour and counterpoint, the camera's movements taking on a life of their own. The narrator sets the tone for the Beaufort ball as Regina Beaufort/Mary Beth Hurt leaves the opera to return home, as we've already seen, with Scorsese providing a few choice details of various anonymous servants: one helping her on with her coat, others warming themselves at a brazier outside as the camera moves right to include the door through which Regina appears, another taking her arm to help her to her carriage. The narrator explains that "Carriages waited at the curb for the entire performance," adding with a quiet laugh, "It was widely known in New York but never acknowledged that Americans want to get away from amusement even more quickly than they want to get to it." The camera follows Mrs Beaufort's progress from above her head as she gets into the carriage, then pulls back over the carriage roof to face the scene straight on as the carriage pulls away to the right, the singing from the opera continuing throughout. The camera pulls back further as the aria ends, and the image dissolves to the Beauforts' ballroom with the chandelier shrouded as the narrator resumes, explaining that "Such a room, shuttered in darkness three hundred and sixty-four days of the year was felt to compensate for whatever was..." [Here she pauses meaningfully.] "...*regrettable* in the Beaufort past."

As the narrator continues to let us in on the contrast between Regina's respectability and the "dissipated habits" of her husband Julius/Stuart Wilson, the chandelier is suddenly seen to be uncovered, though it is almost impossible to spot the dissolve, since the rest of the room persists exactly as before with no visible disruption to its solidity. This magical effect is intensified as the music for the ball begins, the room gets lighter, and lines of dancers and spectators are revealed around the periphery and down the centre of the previously empty room with the ball suddenly in full flow, though once again the characters have been imperceptibly dissolved into the scene, with their surroundings appearing to be solid and



Newland (Daniel Day Lewis)
and May (Winona Ryder)

unaltered throughout. So while the narrator is more concerned to inform us of who these people are and the interesting details of their backgrounds, characters and particular circumstances, the stunning visual discourse is in the service of a more serious purpose in conjuring up a visual equivalent for the essential transience of these characters' lives and the enduring structures within which their lives are played out. The amusement in Woodward's voice is counterpointed by Scorsese's much darker tones, though both of them appear to be simultaneously detached from the world they chronicle – spatially removed from it, standing aside from its ideological constraints, calm and confident throughout – and yet somehow moved by the struggles and defeated passions of at least some of the characters within it, particularly in the later stages of the film.

Following the *tour de force* of these opening moments of the ball sequence, we cut to a shot of a tabletop covered by pairs of white gloves set out on a white cloth with a black background at the top and bottom of the shot, one of many images to which I referred earlier where darkness is seen to surround people or emblems of a glittering world of social functions and display. The camera pulls back as Newland enters from the right, handing his gloves to a servant and receiving a clean pair in return. The narrator continues her explanation of the niceties of the occasion, particularly the fact that Newland has come earlier than usual so that the announcement of his engagement can divert gossip away from May's cousin Ellen and demonstrate his support for her family. The extended narration that follows generates an extraordinary long take as we follow Newland through what the narrator describes as "a vista of enfiladed drawing rooms," that is, rooms laid out as if threaded on a string. In the course of this, we see Mrs Beaufort standing in front of a portrait of herself, a doubling which is one of many equivalences of people and material things which in some way represent them or stand in for them – bearing the weight of their emotions, say, or mirror-aspects of their characters.

For example, Mr Letterblair/Norman Lloyd, Newland's superior at the law firm where he works, will use a metal cigar clipper to snip off the end of his cigar with cold efficiency, when he instructs Newland to persuade Ellen not to sue for a divorce, and Newland will ineptly demonstrate his "new stylographic pen" to Ellen when, full of desire, he pursues her in Boston, the pen needing to be briskly shaken to make it work, with Newland describing the process as like jerking down the mercury in a thermometer, a reminder of the feverishness of their encounters. The novel itself speaks of May's engagement ring as "a large thick sapphire set in invisible claws" (p. 28, *op. cit.*). Though this suggestive description is missing from the film, May's steely competence with bow and arrow when she wins the competition at the Newport Archery Club makes a similar point, and her triumph in hitting her target (in this case, more literally) is once again signified by a piece of jewelry, here a brooch in the shape of an arrow, one of many weapons in her arsenal. Ironically, Newland himself invests an object with the qualities of its owner when he discovers Ellen's parasol carelessly left outside the Blenker house and lifts the handle to his lips, eyes closed in rapture, only to discover a few moments later that it belongs to the Blenker girl instead.

In the present instance of the Beaufort ball, the film's more

particular thematic interest in paintings carries on from the doubling of Mrs Beaufort by her portrait, as does the narration and the accompanying long take. The camera continues to follow Newland, turning aside from him for a moment to look at another painting, then returning to him and circling around to frame him from the front as he turns to look at the scandalous nude by Bouguereau – which, we are told, "Beaufort had had the audacity to hang in plain sight" – then, finally, circling around to face this painting itself. As the camera rises up, we see a nude woman, arms crossed over her breasts, but with the rest of her revealed, presenting an image of modesty and immodesty combined. The camera moves to the right as Newland, with a last glance at the painting, continues to walk away from the camera down the vista of rooms, and the painting's contrast between discretion and display is echoed in the narrator's comment that Archer "enjoyed such challenges to convention. He questioned conformity in private, but in public he upheld family and tradition."

The camera moves away from Newland to a detail of another painting, where two men dressed formally and wearing white gloves are engaged in conversation at a social gathering of some sort, while a woman in the foreground looks away out of the frame, apparently oblivious to their words, which may well be at her own expense. As if to emphasize the centrality of this image of a woman oblivious to gossip which has the power to shatter her world – an image close on the heels of the earlier one of a woman poised between modesty and immodesty which Beaufort has chosen to display – the long take which began with the shot of white gloves laid out on a table finally comes to an end. Throughout the shot, the camera has moved slowly and gracefully, often motivated by the narrator's words, but revealing more forcefully its sympathetic interest in the vulnerability of women to gossip and, indeed, to male audacity as well.

After Newland enters the main ballroom, we cut to the orchestra on a balcony above, and another long take begins. The narrator herself continues to ease us into the scene by introducing us to its most important figures, pointing out, for example, both the extent of Lefferts' authority, from his undisputed expertise on "pumps versus patent leather Oxfords" to his skills in "matters of surreptitious romance," as if one's management of both shoes and women were part of a single process, and also the fact that Beaufort was "absolutely audacious" not just in the display of the Bouguereau but "in his personal affairs" as well. However, where the tones of her narration are dry and amused, the camera continues to be more critical. For example, the narrator's comments on Lefferts as an authority on form are accompanied by a doubling of his image by a mirror, as a young woman listens to him talk, which suggests hypocrisy and undermines his condemnation of others for transgressions he indulges in himself. Though we have no more than a faint suspicion of his infidelities here, they will be confirmed later in the film, for example, during the farewell dinner for Ellen near the end of the film when van der Luyden/Michael Gough comments to Newland: "Have you ever noticed? It's the people with the worst cooks who are always yelling about being poisoned when they dine out. Lefferts used to be a little more adept, I thought. But then, grace is not always required as long as one knows the steps." Van der Luyden's explanation is already contained in the mirror shot of Lefferts at the Beaufort ball, and his later explicit-

ness is more for Newland's benefit as van der Luyden gently teaches him a bitter lesson about his indiscreet pursuit of Ellen than to give us – or, indeed, Newland – information about Lefferts alone. Thus, the narrator's amusement at the foibles of New York high society at the Beaufort ball is darkened by the implicit criticism of male duplicity provided by Scorsese's *mise-en-scène*.

Between the narrator's delineations of the skills and shortcomings of Lefferts and Beaufort, she turns her attention to Sillerton Jackson, the camera following him, at first from behind, as he moves to two women on the right, with Jackson continuing to gossip throughout the narrator's account: "The mean and melancholy history of Countess Olenska's European marriage was a buried treasure he hastened to excavate. He carried, like a calling card, an entire register of the scandals and mysteries that had smoldered under the unruffled surface of society for the last fifty years." If the film presents its world as already a thing of the past (as in the narrator's reference to the way things happened "in those days" which we looked at earlier), then here, embedded within its pastness, is *another* past of "the last fifty years," a repository of scandal to which Sillerton Jackson holds the key. In fact, by the end of the film, when Newland's and May's children are grown up and May herself is dead, we can perceive an even more complicated temporal structure as Newland's middle-aged perspective merges with the narrator's, Newland seeing the 'present' events of much of the film as "those days" of his own lost past. So the film is located within a 1990s perspective which orientates itself back towards a narrator who herself is orientated towards an earlier time. In her attitude towards the film's 'present' visual display of a past narrative world, she anticipates Newland's own final position of looking back and remembering. Thus, the characters themselves, as we see them for most of the film, are triply embedded in the past: by the film, by the narrator, by the older version of Newland himself. Each of these perspectives reworks characters and events to its own ends.

The reference which the narrator makes to the lay-out of rooms in the Beaufort house – as "a vista of enfiladed drawing rooms" – is a precise description of the film's temporal structure as well, with the camera taking us into the connected spaces of the narrative world through its elaborate long takes, while the narration simultaneously takes us back into a connected series of receding pasts, with the vista of "the last fifty years" provided by Sillerton Jackson's treasure chest of gossip stretching furthest back. It is not clear whether the narrator's voice originates from exactly the same time-frame as that which Newland occupies when on the brink of old age, or whether it issues from a significantly later time, although, given the fact that the book appeared in 1920, Edith Wharton's voice is presumably later. In any case, the narrator is certainly the most recent voice we actually hear, providing the point of origin for its vista of 'enfiladed' time schemes, just as the self-conscious and exploratory camera whose presence is so strongly felt throughout the film is its point of origin in terms of our orientation in space. In this way, both camera and narrator are centrally placed to explore the film's respective thematic concerns with contrasts between the visual and the hidden (or, more specifically, the audacious and the discreet), and, on the other hand, those between the present and the lost possibilities of the past. Further, the embeddedness of the

film's characters in these elongated vistas of space and time, as well as the displacement of their emotions into paintings, jewellery, ornaments and gadgets, make it difficult for us to approach them too closely and to relinquish our position as detached observers on the periphery of this world. This sometimes gives the characters an impenetrability which leaves us to infer their motives and inner life from aspects of the film's style, tone and décor, as well as compelling us to take many of the narrator's assertions on trust rather than being able to verify them for ourselves.

Such detachment from the characters becomes even clearer in the scene after the Beaufort ball, when Newland, May and her mother pay a "required betrothal visit" to Mrs Mingott/Miriam Margolyes, an influential relation of the Wellands, in her grand but isolated house "in an inaccessible wilderness near the Central Park" (a description by means of which the narrator places the narrative world squarely in the viewer's past, perhaps the only instance where our ironic understanding of the distance New York has travelled since the time the film is set surpasses the understanding of the narrator herself). The scene opens with an iris shot of the sapphire engagement ring on May's finger, and the blackness in the masked-off portion of the frame around the circular image of May's hand provides a particularly apt use of darkness, here surrounding the prospect of Newland's marriage to May as signified by the ring. As the scene progresses, with five lap dogs perched on and around Mrs Mingott as she holds court, and with a painting of herself and many others of her dogs on the walls around the room, the camera responds to the narrator's lead as she keys us into the scene. Prising itself away from the characters in order to move gracefully around the space, it explores Mrs Mingott's possessions, wanders into an adjoining room, then floats up the stairs, past a series of unpeopled landscapes of the Hudson valley. The idea of enfiladed rooms so powerfully evoked at the Beaufort house is repeated here in miniature, with an "unexpected vista of her bedroom" on the ground floor, an arrangement necessitated by "the burden of her flesh" (another version of the way the characters are weighted down by possessions, though here more literally, and by her own body). The open display of "the foreignness of this arrangement, which recalled scenes in French fiction," is an example of the same audaciousness which led Beaufort to give his Bouguereau nude so prominent a place in his own domestic lay-out.

If the placement of Beaufort's nude indicates his clear intention to shock visitors to his house, the painting at the top of Mrs Mingott's stairs provides a shock unintended by Mrs Mingott but, rather, the result of a fortuitous collusion between narrator and camera: precisely as the narrator informs us how, in Newland and May, "two of New York's best families would finally and momentarily be joined," the camera moves to a painting of a young woman on the point of being scalped by two Indians. The pointed irony of this will receive retrospective reinforcement at the farewell dinner for Ellen, when the narrator describes Newland's realization that "the whole tribe" had finally "rallied around his wife," making him "a prisoner in the center of an armed camp." At the present earlier stage, however, the painting appears to be setting May up as victim of this marriage, as much as Newland will feel himself to be in the later scene, consistent with the film's tendency to see women as the main victims of social constraint and

control – Ellen, above all – with ‘audacious’ men like Lefferts and Beaufort suffering no more than gossip at their own expense, rather than the interference and exclusion endured by women who fail to conform. Thus, when Ellen and Newland are separated, he is welcomed back from the social wilderness he had risked inhabiting, to be surrounded by an expanding family and friends, while Ellen returns to a loveless life in Europe, financially independent of her husband, Count Olenski, but still legally tied to him by marriage.

It is worth observing that, when Sillerton Jackson comes to dine at the Archer home, in the scene directly after the betrothal visit to Mrs Mingott, his after-dinner comments about the Count to Newland, when the two men retire from the women to smoke their cigars, obliquely extend the film’s treatment of women to include homosexual men as well: “Handsome they say, but...” [pausing significantly] “...eyes with a lot of lashes. When he wasn’t with women, he was...” [another pause as he looks around to see whether the servants – visible to us only in a mirror – are listening] “...collecting china. Paying any price for both, I understand.” Not only do his astringent comments have the effect of reducing women to no more than china objects for sale, but his euphemisms hint that the Count may have predatory homosexual tendencies and that homosexual men, like women and china, are mere possessions to be bought by those with the money and standing to do so, at least when they have no such wealth and status themselves.

The bad treatment meted out to Ellen ignores her blamelessness in such an intolerable marriage in which, Jackson tells Newland, she was practically a prisoner, and the disapproval she receives is a reaction to her failed marriage and European associations alone, well before she and Newland have fallen in love. This animosity towards Ellen reaches a culmination in everyone’s polite refusals to attend Mrs Mingott’s dinner in her honour. As Mrs Archer/Sian Phillips expresses her dismay to her daughter Janey/Carolyn Farina and her son, we cut to a shot of Newland lost in thought, with a painting of a cow on the wall beside him on the right of the frame, its body orientated in the same direction as his with both of them facing towards our right. As with so much in the film, the implications of this – that Newland too is conventional and one of the herd (despite his attempts to defend Ellen to Sillerton Jackson in the earlier scene) – will not be fully displayed until the final scene in Paris at the end of the film when he is widowed, but still refrains from visiting Ellen, on the grounds that he is “old-fashioned,” that is, still governed by the customs and practice of the past. However, in the first meeting between them, in the Mingott box at the opera at the start of the film, when Ellen holds out her hand to him in enthusiastic greeting of a childhood friend, his hesitation before he takes her hand is early proof of how distasteful he considers her breaches of convention to be. In the novel, Newland “bowed without extending his hand, as was the custom on being introduced to a lady,” with Ellen “keeping her own pale-gloved hands clasped on her huge fan of eagle feathers” (p. 18, op. cit.), but the film makes quite clear that Newland is slighting Ellen, just as the brief darting glance of her eyes from side to side as he finally takes her hand makes clear that she knows it.

From the shot of Newland with the painting of the cow, we have a series of dissolves to close-up extracts from the many letters of apology for Mrs Mingott’s dinner, the letters then

flipping towards us with one quickly following another. From this we dissolve to Ellen seated on the right of the frame, with a painting of a seated woman with a parasol in the background of the shot. Although we can’t see it clearly here, Newland will study the painting closely on his first visit to Ellen’s house, where the facelessness of the woman in the painting will illustrate the narrator’s present words: “Archer knew these signs. They were not subtle and were not meant to be.” [Here the camera approaches Ellen, then dissolves to a shot of her from the other side, the camera continuing to move in on her.] “They were more than a simple snubbing. They were an eradication.” By now we’re in close up, as Ellen turns towards the camera unsmiling, and the image fades to red.

Newland and his mother hasten to the van der Luydens, the “single court of appeal” in such matters, to ask for their help in standing by Ellen and thereby demonstrating their loyalty to May, thus allowing Newland to champion Ellen from the purest of motives: his devotion to May. The composition, as we cut to a two-shot of Louisa and Henry van der Luyden facing the camera between two identical glass vases or decanters, is very formal, unbalanced only by Louisa sitting at an angle while her husband is well set back and facing straight to camera. Their heads are backed by the blackness at the bottom of a painting on the wall behind them which is all we can see of it until the camera pulls back to reveal it to be a portrait of Louisa in a black, lace-trimmed dress. After a shot of Newland and his mother, as he pleads his case, we cut to a symmetrical shot of Mrs Archer and Newland on the left, facing Louisa and Henry on the right. The camera moves in on Henry from the side, Louisa leaning towards him in an oddly deferential pose, her expression unreadable and her eyes avoiding contact with any of the others, the lids half-lowered or staring off into space as her husband offers to invite Ellen to a dinner for their cousin, the Duke of Austrey. He purports to speak for both himself and his wife – “I’m sure Louisa will be as glad as I am” – but, although we earlier see Louisa’s lips move in conversation while the narrator speaks over the beginning of the scene, and she certainly speaks elsewhere in the film, we never hear her words in the present scene nor get her reaction to what her husband has now decided for them both. She merely presents a disturbingly passive and ghostly appearance throughout, and so the effect is of another woman obliterated, like Ellen, despite Louisa’s contrasting respectability and lofty status beyond reproach. The lack of focus of her gaze and the precariousness of her posture make her seem at times to be almost in danger of toppling over as she leans towards her husband, and this has the effect of destabilizing the image of a united front which the couple present to the world.

Even May Welland, for all her girlish vivacity and ready smiles, seems to be travelling down a similar path of self-effacement. Thus, the narrator muses, on Newland’s behalf, after his marriage to May: “But what if all her calm, her niceness, were just a negation – a curtain dropped in front of an emptiness? Archer felt he had never yet lifted that curtain.” So whereas Ellen’s eradication comes from the outside, May’s is more terrifying in being self-imposed, and in leading not to the social ostracism and exile which are Ellen’s fate, but to the sort of faded existential blankness that Louisa van der Luyden seems to embody as little more than a spectral presence in her husband’s life, at least in the scene just considered. Although

the narrator tells us that Ellen herself remained in Newland's memory in the course of his honeymoon "simply as the most plaintive and poignant of a line of ghosts," her more enduring qualities and her capacity for passion may lead us to believe that, even after her years alone in Paris by the end of the film, she will not have faded away in herself, but only in Newland's imagination, whereas May ultimately colludes in a much more substantial process of self-obliteration.

This distinction between Ellen's and May's eradications is developed after the van der Luydens' party, a formal affair where the surface order and symmetry of the couple's lives are given an airless quality by the perfection of the dinner preceding the party (described by the narrator as having "almost a religious solemnity"), culminating in an overhead shot of the abstract geometry of the table where the red splash of Ellen's dress stands out from the black and white clothes of everyone else, and by the advanced years of most of the guests at the dinner. From the overhead shot we dissolve to the camera gliding behind the backs of the guests on Ellen's side of the table, then stopping at Ellen's back as her face turns to the right and her boredom is evident in the tightness of her smile. At the party which follows, Ellen defies convention by walking away from a conversation with the Duke to join Newland at the opposite end of the room, responding to van der Luyden's interruption, when he brings someone to meet her, by turning to Newland and appearing to remind him (though her invitation comes out of the blue), "Tomorrow, then, after five, I'll expect you." After a barely perceptible hesitation, he agrees.

The next scene, which opens with a cut from Louisa van der Luyden to the painting mentioned earlier of a faceless woman with a parasol, is the first of many private meetings between Newland and Ellen, though she is not yet home as he explores her sitting room: there is a sculpted mask on a table, as well as a seemingly endless painting of a group of buildings stretched out beside the sea whose look anticipates the Blenker place near Newport and is "a joke about wide-screen cinema," according to Scorsese (p. 189, op. cit.). These private meetings will find their equivalents in the edgy conversations between Newland and May after their marriage. Both the developing love scenes and the marital scenes take place in locations full of shadows, with pools of darkness threatening to engulf the characters as they speak, and they are largely structured around cuts, rather than the sweeping camerawork of the social occasions – the dinners, parties, theatre visits, and so on – elsewhere, the cuts largely motivated by the characters' words, in what are fairly conventional shot/reverse shot patterns. The other striking aspect of these private moments – particularly in the scenes involving Ellen – is the silence of the narrator's voice which, by contrast, is so dominant a presence in the party scenes. Her absence at such moments complicates our response to her confident assertiveness elsewhere, suggesting that the knowingness of her narration may be a front, or at least an index of how immersed she is in the social world she purports to disdain.

Following Newland's first visit to Ellen, when he is at pains to point out the service done to her by the van der Luydens in inviting her to their party, implicitly chiding her for the lack of proper gratitude in her remark about the gloominess of their house, we cut to a high-angle shot of Newland as he passes a florist's, turns, and goes in, the camera moving down to his level as he enters. The sudden burst of colour in the

shop, with yellow roses prominent in the foreground, surrounds Newland as he confirms a standing order of lilies of the valley for May and orders the yellow roses for Ellen. A sequence of edits (dissolve/cut/dissolve) on Newland's hands as he addresses the envelope and puts his card inside are followed by several rather more decisive cuts as he removes the card, folds it and places it back in his pocket. The change of heart turns on Newland's hesitation – after the dissolves but before the series of cuts – which is presumably motivated by a perceived insinuation in the florist's offscreen voice as he tells his assistant: "Mr Archer. Two *separate* orders." It is one of many such hesitations on Newland's part in the course of the film (beginning with the pause before he takes Ellen's hand at the opera near the start of the film) which open up a space of conflict between his desire to conform and his fantasies of escape from such conformity, and they make clear that the gift of roses to Ellen is more than mere kindness to his fiancée's cousin.

From a shot of Newland returning the folded card to his pocket, we cut to a shot of Ellen's maid opening the door as the roses arrive, the camera eagerly moving forward towards the box of flowers on the cut. This is followed by dissolves to the maid opening the box and then to Ellen arranging the flowers in a vase, the camera first moving in on the maid and then circling behind Ellen while she turns back to the camera and smiles, as the image fades to yellow. The yellow then fades to white, with May's voice telling Newland how wonderful it is to wake up with lilies of the valley every morning, as the image of May and Newland walking together in an aviary of white cages and décor emerges through the whiteness of the screen. The fades to yellow and white and their respective links to Ellen and May make an obvious point about the contrast between Ellen's warmth and May's emotional deficiencies, but because they also relate to the fade to red which accompanied the narrator's description of Ellen's 'eradication', they provide a less obvious *link* between the two women as well.

Thus, they reiterate the film's earlier concern with the containment of women which is reinforced by showing Ellen alone at home in an unfashionable neighbourhood where no one but Newland and the disreputable Beaufort appear to visit, and by placing May in a setting where white cages seem to entrap her and Newland as they stroll behind and between them and where the only intrusion of vibrant colour is when a raucous blue and red parrot spreads its wings in the foreground of one of the shots as they walk by behind it. Although Newland is also subject to the implications of the two locations, his complicity in all this cannot be ignored. After all, his gifts of yellow roses and white lilies of the valley motivated the fades, while his perception of the two women's contrasting qualities, which motivated the choice of flowers to begin with, may be partly a result of his own projections. His fastidious wish to enter into a conventional marriage with a bland and unimaginative woman, no matter how poorly it serves them all, is paving the way both for Ellen's eventual exile and for a certain hardening of May. This is already evident in the growing artificiality of her smile and the stiff unsuitability of some of her clothes (for example, the awkward way May's hat sits at the back of her head in the aviary scene, her ears exposed and a large bow tied unbecomingly around her neck), in contrast to the film's increasingly radiant presentation of Ellen's beauty.

Letterblair's voice is overlaid on the end of the aviary scene,



Newland and Ellen: tensions and perils

leading into his dinner with Newland when he instructs him to use his influence with Ellen to dissuade her from divorce. Whereas, on Newland's first visit to Ellen, he got there first and watched through her window as Beaufort dropped her off outside, now Beaufort and Ellen are already together inside when Newland turns up for the second time. Beaufort is also present in the immediately following scene at the theatre, sharing a box with Ellen, Lefferts, Mrs Beaufort and others, when Newland joins them and talks with Ellen in a sort of coded intimacy within the box (an intimacy reinforced by an iris shot which isolates the two of them, as if alone). When Ellen reacts to this closeness by fleeing to the van der Luydens' home on the Hudson, Newland takes up an invitation from Larry Lefferts and his wife for a week-end nearby. Once again, Beaufort plays the part of a potential rival when Newland spots him approaching through the window of the old patroon house where they've gone to be alone, and once again Newland reacts with jealousy and suspicion – "Is he what you are running from? or what you expected?" – though she replies hastily, "I didn't know he was here." The insistence of this recurring pattern of Newland seeking Ellen out in Beaufort's footsteps presents Beaufort as a sort of alter ego to Newland, or at least a demonstration of what Newland could become if he continues to ignore convention in his pursuit of Ellen. Beaufort himself presents, in splendidly knowing tones, a foretaste of the kind of attitude Newland can expect if he persists, as Beaufort enters the patroon house and turns to Newland with mischievous good humour and a trace of malice: "Well, Archer. Rusticating?"

The use of such euphemisms – the indirectness of so many of the conversations throughout the film – is a ready source of pleasure for the viewer, though Newland himself gets no enjoyment from Beaufort's remarks. The return of the narrator after the scene at the theatre and then bookending Newland's reunion with Ellen at the patroon house on the Hudson (though her narrating voice is absent from the scene itself), adds to our detachment from Newland as much as does the ironic humour of Beaufort's words. Fuelled by his reading of a poem entitled 'Supreme Surrender' which we see in an open book before him, Newland crumples a letter from Ellen that night (as he will crumple a telegram from May a few scenes later) and rushes to May's side in Florida, where she and her mother are spending the winter. May gives him a last chance to get out of the marriage – by asking whether there's "someone else" – but he insists that he is free. As they embrace in front of a statue in a sunny garden, a cut to long-shot makes it virtually impossible to distinguish them from statues themselves.

In the course of Newland's final visit to Ellen's house on his return from Florida, many elements which we've already noted in other intimate scenes between them persist: the absence of the narrator's voice, the presence of Beaufort (here merely implied in the shape of a huge bouquet of red roses he'd sent which Ellen brushes aside as ridiculous), the encroaching pools of blackness in the frame, the confrontational cuts between them as they speak, and the way Newland continues to rush headlong into a marriage at odds with his desires, declaring he has no intention of marrying anyone but May, though he insists later in the scene: "Nothing's done that can't be undone. I'm still free. You can be too," despite his having advised Ellen earlier against a divorce.

However, with his head on her lap, his dark hair and jacket partially blocking her from view, he becomes the personification of the devouring blackness seen previously mainly as part of the surrounding décor. Over these images, we hear Ellen explain that it is too late for them to be together: "If we act any other way, I'll be making you act against what I love in you most...I can't love you unless I give you up." At this point the onscreen image has an almost abstract quality, a bit like her paradoxical logic, with Ellen's face offscreen and Newland's half-hidden in her lap, while her sleeve and outspread fingers are pale against the blackness of his jacket, which fills most of the frame. After a couple of dissolves to medium-long shots of their continuing embrace, there is another dissolve, this time to a servant's hand bearing a telegram from May on a silver tray: if Beaufort is one sort of interruption, then May is another.

May's voice bridges a cut to a shot of her in another unflattering hat as she speaks the contents of the telegram (that Mrs Mingott and Mrs Welland have agreed to move the wedding forward as Newland wished) direct to camera, just as Ellen had read her letter to Newland from the van der Luydens' place straight to camera earlier, with the camera moving closer in both cases as the women speak. The parallel set-ups link the two women at the very point when the contrast between the alternative futures they offer Newland is most apparent. May maintains a smile throughout her speech, while the camera takes us so close to her face that a bulging vein in her forehead can be seen and her smile is edged outside the frame. It is one of many moments where Newland's fate is sealed, but which result from prior actions of his own (here, his attempts to convince May and her family to move the wedding date forward which have now borne fruit). It is also one of many moments when May's face appears to solidify into a fixed and smiling mask whose grotesqueness recalls the face of the singer playing Margherita in heavy stage make-up in the production of *Faust* at the beginning of the film.

In the scenes that follow, the narrator is once again in full flood, as she guides us through the preparations and aftermath of the wedding, though the wedding itself is never shown. Among many ironies, Ellen gives the couple "an exquisite piece of old lace" (recalling the repressive connotations of lace we noted elsewhere), and May accepts the loan of the patroon cottage as a honeymoon surprise for Newland before their extended trip abroad. The narrator's account of their European trip is illustrated by paintings at first, including one of Trafalgar Square where a woman with a parasol looks directly out at us while a family with three children (as Newland and May will have) sweep past. In an open carriage in Paris, Newland and May disagree about a Frenchman whom Newland considers "an interesting fellow," but May finds "common." The couple's silence as they look off in opposite directions after he concedes that he won't invite the man to dine is followed by blackness engulfing them from both sides, like curtains closing, effectively bringing the honeymoon to an end.

We have already examined a number of the remaining scenes, for example May's archery triumph in Newport, and Newland's pursuit of Ellen at the Blenker house and then in Boston. Beaufort's sudden financial ruin provides a trenchant equivalent for the growing devastation of Newland's marriage. As Newland and May return home from a dinner where

Beaufort's misfortunes are the main topic of conversation, Newland's unhappiness is given a visual equivalent in the gloomy lighting of his marital home as he and May climb the stairs and intricate shadows from filigree metalwork fall on the walls and across them both. His plan to visit Ellen in Washington – presented to May as a business trip to argue a patents case at the Supreme Court – is made unnecessary by Mrs Mingott's stroke and her recalling Ellen to New York, May catching him out in his account of why he won't be going after all (Newland telling her the case has been postponed when she knows otherwise) and arguing her case as doggedly as any lawyer, though never quite to the point: "So then it's not postponed?" "No, but my going is."

Three scenes of Ellen and Newland alone together remain: when he collects her at the rail terminus to bring her back to Mrs Mingott's by carriage, when he waylays her in a snowy street (only to be spotted by Larry Lefferts walking past), and when they meet in the art museum in the park. The unlikelihood of their finding a place where the two of them can be happy is indicated not only by the darkness of the carriage and the furtiveness of all these meetings, but by Ellen's realistic remarks ("Where is that country?" she asks him. "Have you ever been there?"), which are reinforced by an item in a display case at the museum where they meet, labelled "USE UNKNOWN," reiterating the difficulties of navigating a culture whose rules and customs are other than their own. May is decisive in cutting Newland off when he tries to tell her about his feelings for Ellen, in the private scenes between them in his study, but she drops a few precisely timed bombshells which show how complete her mastery in disentangling Newland from Ellen has now become. Thus, when they return home early from the opera (*Faust* again, with Ellen wearing her wedding dress, as was customary in the first year of marriage, both the opera and the dress providing yet more ironic intonations), she tells him that Ellen is returning to Europe, hinting at her own role in accomplishing this result, while making it impossible for him to object to what she's done: "...I knew you'd be the one friend she could always count on, and I wanted her to know that you and I were the same in all of our feelings. She understood why I wanted to tell her this." Ruthlessly, implacably, May prises them apart by insisting that her husband's interests are the same as her own. By this merging with Newland, she keeps her husband, but sacrifices any independent identity of her own in a final act of self-effacement.

From the end of this scene, we cut to the final dinner party of the film, the first to be given by Newland and May as husband and wife, as the camera travels the full length of the table from above, ending with a tilt up to Newland's unhappy face at the far end. The clashing colours of the table settings, flowers and after-dinner sweets – a mix of purples, pinks, yellows and reds – produce an effect of emotional volatility, while the excess of sugary food may indicate a certain childishness in May, or perhaps remind us of the bright insincerity of her smiles to Newland in the final stages of the film.

As the narrator continues to set the scene, the camera pulls back in a reversal of its earlier movement, now including the guests as well as the table as it retreats, continuing its backward progress until it is higher and further away than before. The curtains which are now seen framing the diners on either side of the doorway into the room expose the occasion as a skilled and delicately choreographed performance and the setting as

a stage. This choreography of what the narrator describes as "the seamless performance" of a ritual extends to ensuring that Mrs van der Luyden emerges from behind Ellen precisely at the instant Newland offers to see Ellen to her carriage and steal a final moment of intimacy: "We're driving dear Ellen home," Mrs van der Luyden insists firmly. Newland watches, helpless, as they leave: it is the last time he and Ellen will ever meet.

Though Newland still plans to travel, May drives the final nail in his coffin in a bleak and icy scene between them in his study after the party guests have gone, with May not only revealing her pregnancy but also the fact that she had told Ellen about it a couple of weeks earlier. In an echo of their earlier cat-and-mouse conversation when May had questioned Newland about the postponement of the patents case, it is now his turn to cross-examine: "I thought you just said you weren't sure till today." "No, I...I wasn't sure then, but I told her I was." [She raises her head, smiling.] "And you see...I was right." The camera cuts to Newland, and then to a high-angle shot of them both, with Newland in his chair backed by shadows, and May kneeling beside him, the skirt of her dress spread out behind her, in an image of retreat on his part and expansion on hers. From a cut to a medium close-up of Newland, the camera pans right through a series of narrated dissolves ("It was the room in which most of the real things of his life had happened..."), reducing the rest of his life with May to a short sequence of vignettes, as the camera continually circles around the periphery of the room. Suddenly, the narrator reverses Newland's earlier claim that it was Ellen who had given him a glimpse of a real life, and then condemned him to a false one with May. Resolving the contradictions between these accounts seems to require a depth of understanding which the narrator lacks, but which the film itself provides: an understanding that Newland's life with May becomes not what is real, as the narrator suggests, but what he *chooses to regard* as real, with Newland self-consciously reducing Ellen to no more than a dream.

Thus, in the final scene in Paris, when his son Ted tries to orchestrate a reunion between Newland and Ellen, Newland refuses, preferring to close his eyes and hallucinate her surrounded by shimmering water at Mrs Mingott's place in Newport, Ellen turning toward him, radiant, as she had not done then, producing a culmination in fantasy of what eluded him in life. In taking his marriage and family as real, Newland embraces the ideological dictates of his world, though it is a world which no longer exists by the end of the film. For, with an ironic shiver, we discover that Beaufort married his mistress Annie Ring after all and that it is their daughter whom Ted is about to marry. No one remembers the scandals of the past, and no one cares. So the workings of ideology – the acceptance of an inauthentic life as a so-called 'real' one, and the transformation of a more deeply felt existence into no more than a shimmering mirage – become the central subjects of the film.

Deborah Thomas is Reader in Film Studies at the University of Sunderland and author of *Beyond Genre: Melodrama, Comedy and Romance in Hollywood Films* (Cameron & Hollis, 2000) and *Reading Hollywood: Spaces and Meanings in American Film* (Wallflower Press, 2001). The present account is part of a larger work in progress to be published by Cameron & Hollis.

Love Hurts

REDEMPTION WITHIN THE BOWELS OF *SEUL CONTRE TOUS* AND THE CINEMA OF AGGRESSION

BY DION TUBRETT

WARNING: I am about to defend a film that might appear to be initially indefensible. As a result I fear my approach might be too emphatic or insistent, to counter the all too present objections to the film – a preemptive assault, perhaps paralleling the assault of the film. I will apologize now. I will not later.

To survive. Survival is at the centre of Gaspar Noe's cinema. His films force both the characters and audience to survive or be destroyed. The very act of experiencing his cinema is traumatic. The experience is something beyond words, something beyond description. And while no cinematic experience can be properly translated into words, the particular nature of the assault on the viewer that Noe's films constructs makes describing the films, not so much the content but the overall effect, uniquely awkward. But beyond the indescribable experience, in what could incompletely be called a highly manipulative assault, the central themes and formal qualities of the films are more tangible. Noe's first feature film, *Seul Contre Tous / I Stand Alone* (1998), is a masterwork: the maturity and confidence in style; the sincerity to its central hate-filled character coupled with an ironic distance; the commitment to that paralyzing hatred in its stream of consciousness voice-over allowing it to arrive at the very seed of hate. For all these things the film should be applauded. But it seems as if its indulgence in baseness and hatred is so easily interpreted as acceptance and valorization. This is even more recognizable in the majority of critical responses to Noe's most recent film *Irreversible* (2002). The hell Noe presents us with, always tragically marked by a sense of doomed fatalism, is fundamental to an understanding of what he provides as necessary: that is love. But love hurts.

The character of the butcher (Philippe Nahon) is a unifying presence through Noe's films. The butcher first appeared in Noe's short film *Carne* (1992). It centred on the early life of the butcher as he would retell it in the opening of *Seul Contre Tous*. This is helpful but unfortunate because *Carne* is still very hard to see in North America. It is in *Seul Contre Tous* that the butcher is given full reign. It is his film. It is his mind that we enter. It is his hate

we are forced to embrace. *Seul Contre Tous* deals with the fallout and consequences of his actions in *Carne*, the act of failed revenge that put him in jail and separated him from his daughter. The film ends in his union with his daughter. His next appearance is in the enigmatic opening of *Irreversible*. "Time destroys all things" (1) he utters to begin the film, like a world-weary seer who has seen the future and bemoans it. Here he speaks of the consequences of the union with his daughter that ended the prior film. His appearance here is as a sad and reflective harbinger of doom: in a film that centres on the consequences of actions it is fitting that he tells of the consequences of his sexual relationship with his daughter. With his appearance in *Irreversible* he becomes the epitome of Noe's cinema and as such an embodiment of the film. He is a character set adrift in an atavistic world, with the capacity to love but beset by apathy from without breeding hate from within, all the while continuing to make choices, ultimately moral choices, that require love yet revert to its seeming opposite in "survival": survival which is antagonistic; survival which is violence. *Irreversible* provides a summation of his character serving to highlight the themes of that film and its relation to *Seul Contre Tous*.

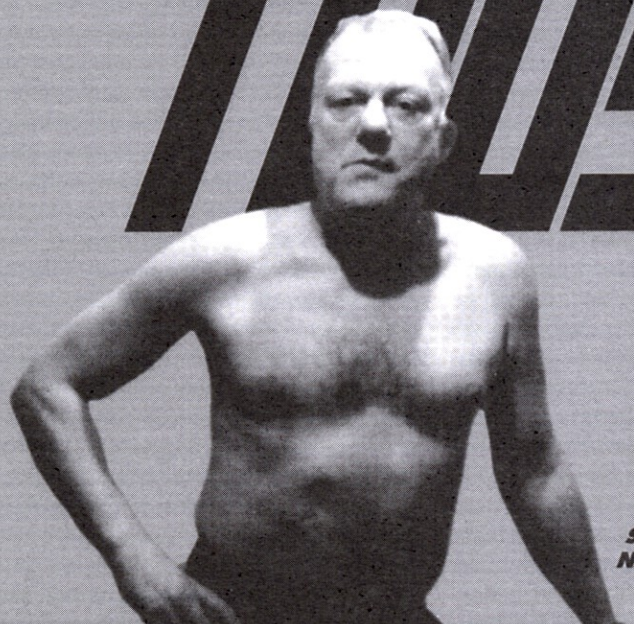
The butcher's cameo in *Irreversible* reveals structural similarities between both Noe's feature films signalling his characteristic style and preoccupations. In this way beginning with the end of the butcher is most fitting. *Irreversible* begins with a vertiginous shot, spiralling from the credits, that settles on a seedy, sparse and harshly lit room. Moving to the near naked form of the butcher he recounts his love affair with his daughter that had returned him to prison. The fluid camera work, moving between him and the other man sitting at the foot of his bed with rapt attention, the reflection on the consequences of actions, and the manipulative and destructive potential of Time are all evident here yet this episode bears no direct connection to the narrative that follows. It holds only thematic resonance. But the thematic relevance is total. This introductory vignette encapsulates the film. It presents the thematic core of the film while also being distinctly set apart from it. The opening sequence operates like a musical Overture or

CRITICS' WEEK AWARD • 1998 CANNES FILM FESTIVAL

PHILIPPE NAHON IN A FILM BY GASPAR NOE

SEUL CONTRE TOUS

MORALITY
HISTORY
TRADITION
CULTURE
EDUCATION
RELIGION
CLASS
FAMILY
HERITAGE
COMMERCE
INDUSTRY
PROPERTY
SAVING
LAW
FISCALITY
BUREAUCRACY
PLOTOCRACY
NEPOTISM
HIERARCHY
DIPLOMACY
UNEMPLOYMENT
INSECURITY
REPRESSION
CENSORSHIP
DENOUNCEMENT
JUSTICE
POLICE
STATE
NATION



DESIGN DENIS ESNAULT / LE VILLAGE



IN THE BOWELS OF FRANCE

I STAND ALONE

Prelude introducing the piece as well as summarizing it. This understanding of the introduction's purpose points to the musical nature of Noe's cinema. His reliance on classical music is telling, but that is largely a superficial association. It is in the rhythms of editing and camera movement, seen through *Seul Contre Tous* and *Irreversible* respectively, as well as the rhythm of the narrative itself that his films fully achieve their musical sensibility. The fluidity of purpose, even in the staccato editing of *Seul Contre Tous*, shows a commitment to a rhythmic integrity that can best be described as musical. While very distinct, both films are easily seen as pieces by the same composer. Where *Irreversible* is a film about consequences, *Seul Contre Tous* is a film about choice: ideally moral and just choices that ought to be formed out of love and not hate.

Seul Contre Tous begins with a vignette similar in design to the introduction of *Irreversible*. It presents several of the film's core stylistic devices and its thematic heart. The intertitle "MORALITY" appears immediately followed by a simple yet brash musical beat. An unidentified man is talking to another in a bar. He begins a diatribe on Morality: "You know what Morality is? I'll tell you what it is. Morality is made for those who own it. The rich. And you know who's always right? The rich. And the poor pay the price." But even more striking than his vehemence or position is the sequence's formal presentation. His speech is punctuated by cuts to black with these same musical beats. Even single shots are broken, and thereby intensified, by these dissections. "JUSTICE" now appears as an intertitle. The man continues, offering to show the other man his Morality. His Morality is a gun that he suddenly takes out and eyeing it with awe waves it in the other man's face: "Take a look. That's Morality for you. You know why I carry this around? Because the guy in blue who shows off his Morality, dig? He's got the upper hand, dig? He and his fucking Justice. But I... Here's my Justice. Whether you're right or whether you're wrong same difference, friend." With this startled intensity the film cuts to black and the opening credits begin. Morality is power; Justice is violence. (2) But it is presented as blatantly arbitrary with not even an illusory sense of its being absolute. The disenchantment with the world, the nature of authority, power and its constructs in Morality and Justice are presented here as a societal concern and not the personal aberration of the butcher's psyche. The sequence also highlights a very tangible class conflict into which the butcher becomes the symbol of the working class poor dismissed by his country. The anger of this initial man is continued by the butcher but expanded in every direction to include race, religion, and gender. As the butcher appears and makes his way into the world it is as if the world itself is positioned against him: one of the ways this antagonism takes shape is through the country's economic recession. His anger comes to rest in, and is continually fostered by, his displacement. And this displacement, from a similar source as the anger in the introduction, is fed by economic/class oppression: for the butcher is defined by his job and has none.

The opening sequence telescopes the rage in the film so that moral disgust at the sense of injustice becomes the grounds for a personal Morality, a personal Justice. While potentially antisocial, the revolutionary or plainly anarchic model, the foundation of this choice is subverted: with a call to personal Morality and personal Justice right and wrong are collapsed. Right and wrong become interchangeable. The power to enact a personal Morality through a sense of personal Justice becomes more important than the outcome or effect of that choice. The choice is more impor-

tant than its consequence. The film, through its introduction, posits the belief that the means justifies the ends. That is what the film seems to grapple with: is it more important to do the right thing, considering the consequences of actions, or to simply do anything, relishing the personal satisfaction of the act itself? That, in its essence, is the butcher's dilemma. He only has to journey through hell to arrive at his answer.

After this opening vignette the title starkly appears preceded by the film's textual synopsis: "Les Cinemas de la Zone present the tragedy of a jobless butcher struggling to survive in the bowels of his nation." What is a "jobless butcher"? What happens when one who is defined by his job, his class, his rank in society loses that? What is a "jobless butcher"? A "jobless butcher" is nothing. The only thing that marks this tangible absence is the resentment at the loss of what once was and the hatred at what has caused it: every element outside personal control every element of contradiction and hypocrisy; every element of society. The film's self description of the "jobless butcher," with its comic undertones of pitiable irony, serves to heighten the sense of self-mockery that the film, through the butcher, comes to embody. It is in this vein that the butcher begins his voice-over which serves as a unifying presence for the film. This frankness and self-derision that the butcher's voice-over exudes, a hatred including self-hate, leads to a particular development in the film's tone. The specific nature of the tone is directly linked to the relationship the film, and by extension the audience, has with the butcher. This relationship, while hinted at in this introductory description, is solidified through his voice-over narration. The first words of the butcher continue from the introductory sequence: "To each his own life, to each his own Morality. My life? There's nothing to it. It's the life of a sorry chump. They should write that someday. The story of a man like so many others, as common as can be." This signals his anonymous place in a continuum; one that is common. He is not unique. His hate is not atypical, it is societal. The fire of his hate is flamed by the perpetual pressure of not being able to maintain his place, even low ranking, within the social strata. The dignity of independence, held while running his own shop, is stripped from him and conversely he hates because he is alone. (3) A slideshow montage of images recollecting his life now follows. These are primarily archival photographs that when amassed present his life, a life that seems to only exist through these public documents, a life in tattered fragments. The butcher, still unseen and existing only as a voice in a boastful confession, tells the story of his life. But in his telling there is a shift in focus: he presents his life in the third person. His story becomes the story of "our man," where a sense of collective responsibility exists. "I" becomes "he." He tells his story but distances himself from it. He is a critical viewer: he is too self-critical to be impartial and his appreciation of his own life oscillates between the ironic and sardonic. This is the peculiar nature of the film. It presents with great intensity and sincerity the mind of the butcher yet his own self-criticism is subversive to it. But the film sides with its protagonist and while its elements can be understood ironically it never fully undermines or collapses what it has constructed. The film, like the butcher, is sadly and wryly laughing at itself.

He has no name. He is defined by his job. He relates that "at the age of 14, driven by survival, he learns to be a butcher." Orphaned and molested he enters the workforce. He is engulfed by the same class conflict the prologue had presented. His existence from this moment is defined by his job, but it is also

defined by "survival." "Survival" becomes the way in which the butcher frames his existence. "Survival" which is always antagonistic. "Survival" which is always in opposition to hope. His life is constructed solely through self-preservation: economically, physically, psychically. He becomes an automaton whose emotions have been carved up like the meat in his job. The only one that has survived, and been fostered, is the only one to help him "survive": that is hate.

The butcher continues his life story and with some detail recounts the incidents that led to the separation from his daughter Cynthia. He misinterprets his daughter's first period as rape. He goes to exact revenge on the man seen with his daughter, innocent of the suspected and invented crime. He attacks another man, an arbitrary victim for the butcher's rage, who is as innocent as the suspect. The butcher must deal with the consequences of this act. He loses his shop and his daughter. The film takes him from this point where arbitrary action with disregard to consequence rules his survival to a point where Morality, while personal, dictates the life he can live with his daughter. This scenario is eerily repeated in *Irreversible* and it does well to look at it and its place within the Morality of Noe's universe. Revenge seems to be the apex of Morality and Justice as described in the beginning of *Seul Contre Tous*: one personally adopted and antagonistic to the power and authority that would cripple the individual, in this case framed in class terms. Revenge in this way becomes a personal and political attack, an attack against the individual transgressors and against the system that solidifies their place and protects them. But the desire for revenge always comes from love: love for those harmed, coupled with horror. Revenge becomes a call to action as much to assert one's own power and agency as it is to right a wrong. But through revenge the love that is at its source is always corrupted. And it is because of that corruption that within Noe's cinematic world revenge is always incomplete. In *Seul Contre Tous* the butcher attacks the wrong man, accused of committing a false crime against his mute daughter. Love, corrupted by pride and hate, displaces itself and thwarts the butcher's attempts at "Justice." In *Irreversible*, when Alex (Monica Bellucci) is raped and beaten her lover, Marcus (Vincent Cassel), sets out to avenge her by finding the culprit, La Tenia. But not only does he not find the right man (the man beaten to death is not the one who assaulted Alex) he is not the one who exacts vengeance. His ally, Alex's former lover Pierre (Albert Dupontel), is the voice of reason set against Marcus' raging instincts and he is the one who mercilessly and deliberately beats the man they find. Here the act of revenge is twice displaced: the wrong man takes vengeance on the wrong man. Rather than viewing these failings of revenge as some bitter *deus ex machina* laughing at those who seek an absent Justice, or a more secular notion of the fated suffering of the innocent, they can be seen in contrast to those moments of success and completion in the films: if revenge fails then what succeeds? And why? It seems that love succeeds while revenge fails because revenge is love corrupted. Both films bear this out. Love is never wholly separate from the harbinger of doom or the spectre of hell that each film initiates but it is the only space of connection and union in the films. Love is always sexual but it is never replaced by sex alone. The space of love is the only one without the same sense of doomed fatalism. And for that reason it is love, and a particular kind of love for sure, that is exalted within the films. It is love that provides not an escape but a refuge from the horror of the world. The intimacy of the lovers' union is a place of hope and bliss and potential. This in

part explains the horror of the Rectum in *Irreversible* or the vacancy of the butcher's encounter with a porno theatre or a prostitute in *Seul Contre Tous*. It appears as if at the centre of the films, beneath all the explosive violence and graphic sexuality, beats a very conservative heart. One that seeks intimacy and love and praises it above all things. But we must go through hell to get it.

The butcher concludes the story of his life. He leaves his mute daughter institutionalized. He leaves prison. He leaves Paris moving north with his pregnant lover, one who is willing to finance a new meat market for him. For all the butcher's hardships he continues on, in words that frame the progression from survival to love, through a newfound hope: "But the butcher, like every man, is a being of pure survival. He decides to forget his past and his betrayal of his daughter. And his love for her. Well, Love is a mighty big word. Few can claim to know what Love is. There you have it, that's me. That's my life. But today I'm starting life over again. Yes, ladies and gentlemen... Today, I'm resetting the counter." At the end of this introductory voice-over the butcher while cohesive and unified in his attitude is still split: his story presents him as resigned in accepting his tragic fate while also hopeful in starting over. This is an extension of the same split that divides the tone of the film, as seen in something specific like the function of the intertitles. The complexities of these elements of the film need to be revisited and reassessed.

In a film which is so connected to a single character, and with such a level of intimacy through the interior monologue of voice-over narration, the audience is encouraged, if not compelled, to identify and empathize with this figure. But this connection is problematic where the audience is forced to identify with such abject hate. The connection with the protagonist is always doubly measured: an identification with his hate is paralleled by the audience's repulsion by it. Although if the audience truly identifies with the protagonist they will surely grow to hate him as he hates the world. Without the butcher's voice-over the film is primarily silent. Most shots of the butcher show him as silent and vacant while his mind continues to criticize and attack the world. The audience's double understanding of the butcher mirrors a similar split in his own persona. His voice-over carries with it a sadistic logic that spans its encyclopedic hate across gender, family, class, sexuality, race, and ethnic lines. And while the audience can only view his mental workings critically, through the continual barrage of hate the logic behind his hate-filled momentum must be understood if not accepted. Without this sincere connection to the butcher the climax and conclusion of the film lose their impact. Without the connection to the butcher the film can provide no sense of release from the hate it has constructed.

A similar division can be sketched in the function of intertitles in the film. Of course there are those titles that are used purely for information situating the time and place. There are those titles that are used as intensifiers, most notably when the butcher is called a "faggot" by his pregnant lover and the word "FAGGOT" flashes on the screen. It is with this that the butcher begins his physical assault. But then there are those intertitles that are more reflective and philosophic statements such as "DEATH OPENS NO DOOR" and "MAN IS MORAL": the former after the death at the nursing home and the latter after choosing not to kill or have sex with his daughter. Since the film is tied so closely to the butcher these statements should be read as issuing from him reflecting his psychological and philosophical state and as such they carry the same intensity and sincerity as the rest of his voice-over. If there is a division in the interpretation of the intertitles,

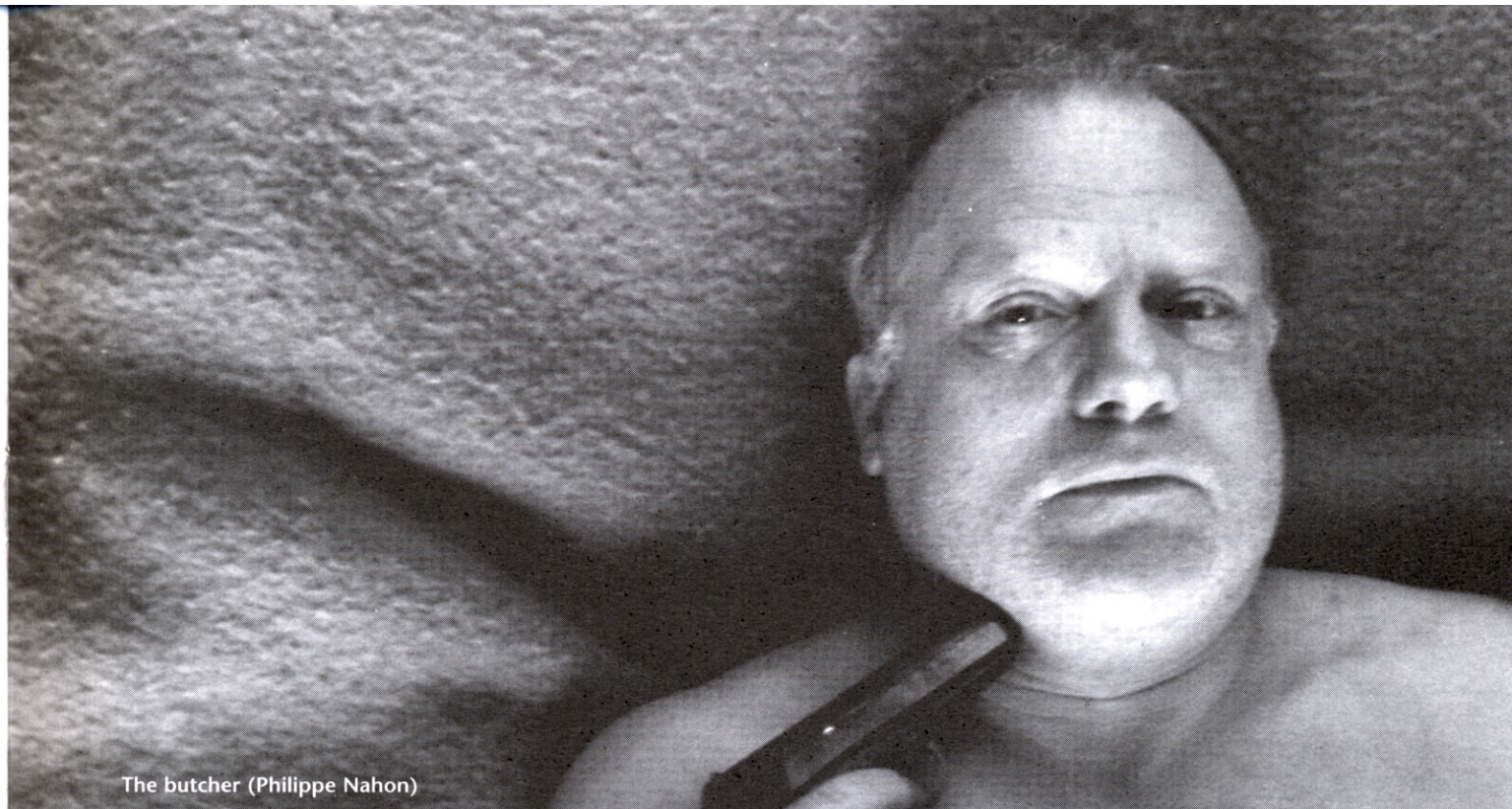
an inheritance of their ironic and intellectual usage as with Godard, it is between the film and the audience, not within the film itself. While critical, the film firmly supports its protagonist.

The first scene with the butcher establishes the context for his position and hate while also cementing the film's visual style, a style equally constructed by hate. The film announces itself as being set in 1980. It begins in Northern France and follows the butcher back to his home, Paris. The France presented is one of urban decay. Perpetual economic recessions and the influx of immigrant populations have displaced the native blue collar French citizen. The hatred this engenders moves beyond the singular butcher into the very fabric of French society, increasing the already present tensions. Within this milieu lurks the butcher. Next to his pregnant lover he remains silent and seething. Out of the seeming complacency of the domestic scene Noe introduces the most startling effect, one which comes to punctuate the film with increasing intensity: a gunshot is distinctly heard on the soundtrack while the camera quickly moves to a closeup of the butcher. The technique, a combination of a track-in zoom with skipped frames, is the cinematic manifestation of the butcher's explosive hatred. But what's more, it is also a direct assault on the audience. The camera quite literally becomes a weapon and the audience must either be on the side of the aggressor or the victim. This is the clearest stylistic technique Noe uses to fashion his cinema as an assault on the viewer – an assault the viewer, through identification, must to a degree become implicated in. Several things are revealed by this technique. The first is the degree to which all elements of the film are aligned with the butcher's psyche. In this case it becomes clear that editing and camera movement are intimately linked to the psychology, and by extension hatred, of the butcher. Secondly, this violent camera movement is the only consistently repeated type of camera movement throughout the entire film; a consistency that is shattered with the film's final shot. (4) Through the use of this extreme and violent camera movement it becomes emphatically clear how limited the movement is and by contrast how static and rigid the rest of the film is. All this in turn highlights another way in which the film is governed by the butcher's hate. Except for the very end the entire film is gripped by the paralyzing hate of the butcher. This rigidity manifests itself in a rigid camera. There seldom any camera movement outside of these violent gunshot transitions. It is only with the film's conclusion, once hatred and fear have given way to love and hope, that the camera is free to move. Its movement, the film's extended moment of liberation, is a visual signal of the freeing power of love and the stagnation associated with hatred.

With these points the particular complexities of Noe's cinema should be clear but its sensational subject matter and graphic presentation might tend to obscure its mastery. It is in this way that I want to offer what I feel is the best description of what Noe is doing, including the mandate he has set out, pointing out that it exists within a reputable lineage. Because of the techniques of enveloping and then implicating the viewer through processes of identification while assaulting the viewer through the film's form and content I feel it appropriate to think of his cinema as a Cinema of Aggression: a type of film that holds the viewer close, increasing the effects of its attack while enabling a critical appraisal of the violence it indulges. It is both an emotional and sensory overload of violence, so much so that it could be seen as gratuitous or glorifying, yet it maintains an intellectual distance.

He has a mandate to assault the viewer and to let them understand, if only through instinct, the true power of violence and their role in that power. The obvious difference from a kind of shock cinema is that this breeds thought, not purely an instinctual response. When trying to assess the peculiar power of Noe's cinema I am reminded of Hitchcock who also worked through intricate systems of identification modelled around instinctual and emotional responses. Films like *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958) and *Marnie* (1964) implicate and attack the viewer through the connection to the protagonist within the framework of a suspenseful narrative. It also seems no coincidence that the popular and critical assessment of Hitchcock, for a majority of his career, was dismissive by overlooking the complexities of his films in favour of an appraisal that valorized "entertainment." The popular and critical reception of Noe has been largely dismissive; but instead of valorizing "entertainment" it is violence that is singled out: graphic violence, culminating in the nine minute rape scene in *Irreversible*, seems to have largely obscured much serious engagement with his cinema. Much like the purpose of hate for the butcher, the nature of his cinema breeds distraction through its uncompromising gaze.

The first time the butcher's hatred explodes from his mind into the external world is perhaps the most disturbing sequence in the film, no small feat indeed. Returning to his apartment after witnessing a death at the nursing home and escaping into porno theatres the butcher enters the domestic bliss of his pregnant lover and her mother eyed with suspicion. His pregnant lover sits knitting and seething, assuming he has been having an affair after hearing he was with a woman earlier in the day – the woman being the nurse he has just consoled. With the click of the door she turns her hate-filled eyes toward him. A gunshot transition fastens on him, the subject of her hate. He returns her gaze. She begins verbally attacking him and accusing him of infidelity as he enters the room. As they face one another the camera changes from static compositions to hand held. She continues to confront him while he maintains a demeanor of passive confusion. For all the hate that has consumed the butcher's thoughts this is the first instance in the film of a similar hate directed solely at him. And it is increasingly important that it is from a woman, it is from his lover. The camera teeters back and forth, visually simmering like the hate between them. The butcher denies her accusations. He says he will leave and she angrily agrees to raise the child on her own. Her mother nervously looks on. The butcher's homophobia rules his anger as he says she will "make a fag out of [the child]." Responding "Like his faggot daddy!" she returns his anger and his hate. (5) But this appears to be one of his deepest fears and hatreds: the threat to the conventional masculinity he has adopted. Up to this point he has experienced repeated attacks on this idea of masculinity. He is emasculated by his lover in her financial control over him, by the deli owner who fires him for not smiling, and generally by society through his displacement and by robbing him of the power and virility associated with the patriarchal idea of masculinity. But this direct assault on his manliness is visually echoed by the intertitle "FAGGOT," accompanied by a gunshot on the soundtrack. He then asserts himself, and that manliness, the only way he knows – violently. Shoving very quickly escalates to hitting. A closeup of him striking her pregnant stomach is followed by a series of shots, shot / reverse shot, highlighting their reactions. In the attack, which lasts nearly half a minute, only two shots lasting one second each show actual contact. (6) The attack is large-



The butcher (Philippe Nahon)

ly a creation of editing and the soundtrack assembled through reaction shots, the wailing of the beaten woman, and the deafening mmuffled sounds of fist against flesh. The horror is not conveyed through the visual beating. It is not even communicated through the sounds of the beating. The true horror is in the butcher's mental assessment of the event, held in his voice-over. Even before he has left the scene of his crime his mind continues, serving as the logic to not shoot her in the face with the gun he has just taken. With her tearful appeal to "call the cops" he backs down, he tells himself that he must "calm down": the most external burst of violence is followed by the most calm interior moment. But this reverie does not last. He immediately resumes his mocking hatred, now proud of his actions but tempered with thoughts of the sad justification of his actions: "Your baby's hamburger meat now, ground beef! He lucked out of laying eyes on your filthy face. . . After those punches she must be shitting her fetus out on the rug. This could cost me a lot. No telling how long I could get for making her abort. She could even pass it off as murder. And she's the one who started it. . . No regrets. The child's better off dead than with those two retards. Fat momma must be hurting now." Yet his invented justification never moves beyond how it affects him and the patronizing attitude he adopts looking down on her with almost more pity for the dead child than he has for himself. Extending his justification begs for someone to have done that to his mother; to have "pitied" him as he "pities" this child – his act is as much a suicidal impulse as it is unthinking instinct. But as damaging as this sequence is on its own the effect on the viewer at this moment is traumatic: by his actions the butcher has severed our empathy and identification with him, in a much more final and violent way than before, while the film commands that we continue to be tied to him and listen to him, through voice-over narration, proudly defend and justify his action. Is redemption for the butcher possible after this act? If we are so closely aligned to the butcher, and his mentality, then "no": if we are bound by resentment and hate we will continue to be so. If we can maintain a split or critical distance to the

film then perhaps "yes" – or simply "perhaps." The butcher has embraced hate but it has also strangled him. The beauty of the film is that it makes identification problematic by forcing our union with him while straining it: the tension we experience living with this character is similar to the tension he experiences living. If his redemption is challenged by his encounter with his pregnant lover it will be the final encounter with another woman, his daughter, which allows for the possibility of release.

The body of *Seul Contre Tous* becomes an extended catalogue of hatred all connected by the butcher's logic demanding self-destruction if "survival" seems impossible. The butcher's journey presents him repeatedly drawn back to the figure of his daughter Cynthia. In his cynical worldview he still maintains some shred of hope for his daughter even though he is faced with her fallen image. While working at a nursing home he comes face to face with the death of an elderly female patient. When he is forced to hold her while she takes her last breaths she exclaims "Daddy... Don't leave me... alone." With a gunshot camera movement there is a closeup of the dead woman. The shot will be repeated with his daughter as she bleeds on the floor in his homicidal fantasy. But again in the film the butcher faces the image of his daughter. In an encounter with a prostitute he sits across from her and she begins to entice him sexually. There is a moment of silent awkwardness followed by her muted words, part whisper, part question, part identification: "Daddy... You won't hurt me will you?" It seems the butcher is perpetually haunted by his responsibility. But more than this, it seems as if his hope to be reunited with his daughter becomes the force that moves him to act. At first this hope is intertwined with his notion of "survival" and his first rekindled thoughts of her involve him taking an active role in her life by mercifully ending it. But as it develops, the hope of reunion with his daughter becomes the overwhelming drive in his life. When he feels he has nothing, he returns to her. Hope becomes a powerful agent: if he hadn't missed his daughter he would have had nothing to look forward to, nothing to hope for. Cynthia for him becomes his tragic Penelope that he endures tri-

als to reach. And while hope for something is fundamentally more powerful than having it, the act of hoping breeds vulnerability. Hope is directly opposed to "survival" as envisaged by the butcher; hope is detrimental to it. But the deeper truth that the butcher suddenly realizes is that hope is the key to survival. And the only thing more powerful than hate is love.

The butcher returns with his daughter to the room where she was conceived. His intention is to end her suffering and complete his responsibilities. He wishes for a final union in violence to end the torment that has been his life. An intertitle appears warning the viewer: "WARNING. YOU HAVE 30 SECONDS TO LEAVE THE SCREENING OF THIS FILM." The countdown continues as the butcher makes the final preparations for their exit. The countdown, as the butcher narrates his own film, becomes the final transition in his mental degradation culminating in the fantasy murder-suicide. The butcher eases his conscience as he talks himself through the murder. He justifies it as he has justified his hatred throughout the film. Yet his murderous action is only within his head, the place where his hate is continually fostered. But he escapes, if only temporarily, the vortex of hate with the striking realization that he cannot hurt his daughter anymore. Without her he is alone. His "survival" now takes another direction. Where before he found sad solace in hate he now finds his redemption in love. "I love you more than anything." He embraces his daughter. His embrace, magnified as he cries "Don't leave me alone" with the Pachelbel Canon on the soundtrack, turns from filial to sexual. Yet this deviation still has an aura of purity about it. Within the world of *Seul Contre Tous* this intimate union, between two characters who are largely mute, is the one point of release. The cyclical nature of the narrative is continued in a closeup that echoes the butcher's sexual relations with Cynthia's mother. "MORALITY" flashes as an intertitle. In the context of the film this Morality appears healing in a land of such alienation and separation. Yet this time, with Cynthia, the sex act is stopped. The intertitle "MAN IS MORAL" flashes with the butcher's advances toward her stopped. He has made his moral choice. His voice-over concludes in a language that prioritizes hope, love and choice in the infinite possibility of the present: "I don't know how today is going to end. But here, with you, I exist. And I'm happy. Happier than ever. The rest doesn't matter." While still fairly dubious in his flouting of prevailing Morality in his union with his daughter, with its sexual dimensions only temporarily suppressed, the film presents this as, if not a healthy relationship, then one that is a refuge from the hell that is everywhere. Love is freeing. It has freed the butcher from his prison of hate. It has freed Cynthia from her catatonic distance. Within Noe's world happiness is possible but it is positioned in a constant battle with those forces that would destroy it.

While this reading of the film's conclusion is allowable it passes over the ambiguities of the sequence, perhaps to offset the overriding negativity of the film as a whole. But the conclusion, like the entire film, is marked by this division in tone. The only thing more stable than the butcher's hate is the film's commitment to his psychology, and the corresponding split in tone and meaning. In this way the role of his daughter Cynthia must be reassessed. After their reunited embrace turns sexual the film cuts to the butcher standing alone on the apartment's terrace. In what is her first action in the film she walks out to him and continues their embrace. While it is initially ambiguous whether

they had sex (his voice-over monologue says they did not), her movement toward him speaks to her acceptance of his advances and acts as a reciprocation of them. But does her muteness and damaged state signal her manipulation by her father rather than conscious intention and motivation? The picture presented, while suspect, indicates her action as an independent choice. It is the butcher's film: we are permitted inside his head but not hers. But this instance of love and acceptance, the moment of their union, is permitted to continue at each of their hands. She is mute. But like her father her muteness communicates. The depiction is not uncomplicated though: the one moment in the film of female choice is to serve the pleasure of male desire. But in the world Noe has constructed her choice also brings to her a measure of comfort and security that is all too precious and ever fleeting. The "happy ending" is far from happy. And there is peace within it.

The film concludes with the butcher's words to his daughter. His voice-over has shifted its focus so that he directly addresses her, the direct address to the audience: "I love you. That's all there is to it." The butcher has redeemed himself through love. Noe's cinema seems at first glance in opposition to such an assessment. Yet if love is taken as the utmost form of "survival," a love not corrupted by hate, then this preoccupation of Noe easily takes shape. The mandate to assault the viewer demands "survival" as its corollary: survival is at the core of Noe's cinema. It is a survival that demands love to quiet the savagery that exists in the world. The task is always presented initially as insurmountable. Love can never totally overshadow the horror that lives in the world but it is where his films ultimately come to rest. To survive. To hope. To love. "That's all there is to it."

Seul Contre Tous is available on DVD in North America as *I Stand Alone* through Strand Releasing Home Video.

This essay is dedicated to Katie Hewitt, Blair Miller and Robin Wood. Noe's cinema is best characterized by the experience itself: the experience, and survival, of hell. I shared this experience with these three people. And we have survived.

Dion Tubrett is a PhD candidate in the Department of Social and Political Thought at York University. His email address is: <dtubrett@yorku.ca>

NOTES

1. Dialogue from films is taken from the English subtitles.
2. "Morality" and "Justice" are capitalized in the subtitles and this holds some minor significance. Morality and Justice, in this film but also more largely in Noe's cinematic world, are characters that are absent yet sought after. The pursuits in the films even deify these things: they become absent gods. And this is in part why the pursuits, the quests for Justice or toward Morality, fail: the journeys are motivated by hate and toward actually becoming Morality and Justice – in effect toward becoming god; a god that is by its very nature absent in Noe's world.
3. The French language title of the film *Seul Contre Tous* roughly translates as "Alone Against All," not the English language title *I Stand Alone*. This difference is significant. The original French title is as bleak and resigned as the English language title is defiant. The sadness the French language title exudes cuts to the heart of the film where the butcher's antagonism is ultimately revealed as reactive fear and not active defiance.
4. The film is primarily comprised of static shots and the very jarring gunshot transitions. Additionally, a hand held camera is used reflecting the butcher's increased instability at points of crisis: most notable in the scenes where he beats his pregnant wife and imagines the murder of his daughter.
5. This is one of many instances in the film showing the horrors and responsibility the butcher feels in his role as "daddy."
6. The way this scene parallels the shower murder scene in *Psycho* (1960) in its cinematic presentation of violence and its affect on the viewer in its construction show yet another affinity to Hitchcock.

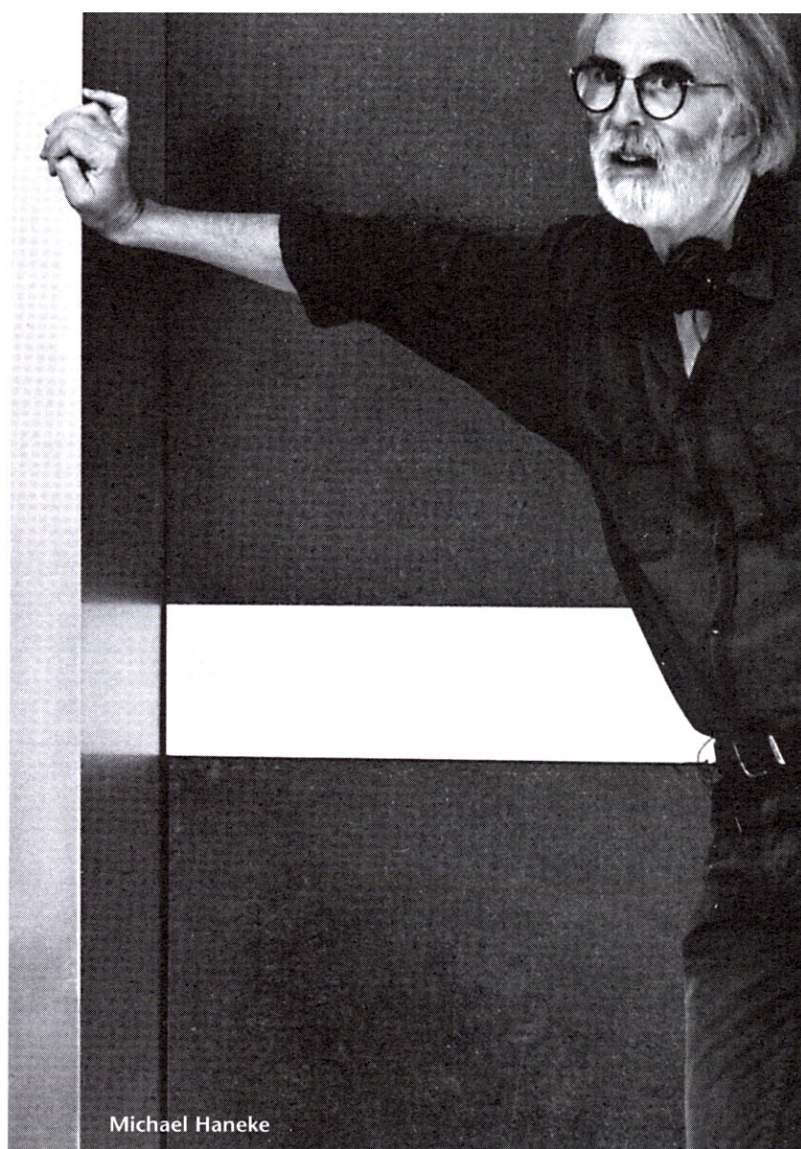
In Search of the *Code Inconnu*

BY ROBIN WOOD

Prefatory

Last January I headed (rather than conducted) a graduate course on 'World Cinema Around the Millennium', in which we watched and discussed, over the twelve weeks, a dozen films by as many directors from Europe, Asia and the Middle East. I count it a great success but can claim little credit for this. During the months prior to and overlapping with the course I was deluged with urgent work, complete with deadlines (writing a new monograph, preparing an expanded edition of a previous book, with all the resultant chores of proofreading, indexing, stills selection, etc.), and was unable to complete the intensive and extensive preparation I had anticipated. In our discussions of films (some of which I'd seen only a couple of times) my students frequently corrected my mistakes and pointed out details I'd missed, but without ever humiliating me (though I thought at times I deserved it). *Code Inconnu* was one of the twelve films. I cannot now identify the students who helped me develop new insights, so this is a general 'Thank you' note to the entire class (several of whom have become my personal friends), and an acknowledgement of the collaborative nature of a course that I enjoyed enormously and from which I learnt a great deal.

During the past several years I have developed a very strong commitment to, and partial identification with, the films of Michael Haneke, decisively confirmed by *Code Inconnu*. I share with his films a sense of despair with our civilization, its future, and ultimately with the human race itself, its seemingly impossible and fundamental contradictions: a full knowledge that I belong to (and have been formed by) that civilization and that race, am implicated in its corruption, can never be anything else, must acknowledge my place and inevitable partial complicity in its tangle of drives and tensions and unresolvable conflicts as we rush headlong towards our potential self-destruction. I feel that the very worst of the various end-of-civilization, end-of-life-on-the-planet scenarios are probably correct, yet love human life (and a limited number of actual humans), not to mention the 'innocent' animal and vegetable life that we shall drag to destruction with us, so much that I cling on passionately to any vestige of hope I can find. This (it seems to me) is what *Code Inconnu* (perhaps the most important film of the past ten years) is about. I have come to identi-



Michael Haneke

fy with Haneke up to the inevitable point where I must recognize that I lack his integrity, his concentration, his dedication, above all his sheer intelligence – because *Code Inconnu* is one of the most intelligent films ever made. It is the most necessary of his films to date, yet it has received less attention than the works that surround it. The reason for this is clear enough: it lacks their ‘sensational’ aspects, hence leaves no opening for the attacks with which those too deeply disturbed by his work defend themselves from its implications: the family who commit communal suicide in *The Seventh Continent*, the teenage murderer of *Benny's Video*, the young sadists of *Funny Games*, the extreme masochist of *La Pianiste*. We cannot say of *Code Inconnu* ‘I am not like that, I wouldn't do those things, it doesn't apply’. The previous Haneke film to which it most closely relates (thematically, and in its multiple intersecting narratives), *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*, is also among his most neglected, and for the same reason.

1. STYLE

The very striking stylistic strategies of *Code Inconnu* are crucial to its significance. Leaving aside the framing device (the deaf-mute children trying to communicate), the film consists of 42 sequences, of which all but four are sequence-shots without cuts. Of those four, two are the photo-montages of Georges' work in foreign countries, and one is the sequence of the shooting of Anne's film (a version of *The Collector*), shot from the viewpoint of the master camera on the set, the one cut being a cut within the diegesis. The fourth (No. 35) clearly occupies a privileged position, being definitive (by negation) of Haneke's stylistic choice and intention throughout the remaining 38 sequence-shots: the sequence (presented without any signalling of a change in level) that is revealed as a sequence in a subsequent film in which Anne stars, the swimming pool scene. If we are truly alert (I wasn't, the first time I saw the film) we should recognize at once, on purely stylistic grounds, that the scene is an anomaly, an abrupt stylistic break: it uses all the standard devices of ‘mainstream’ filmmaking, derived from Hollywood – shot/reverse-shot, point-of-view shots, the zoom, some very dubious spacial relationships, deliberate deception of the spectator (the POV zoom from the child's viewpoint clearly implies that he has fallen or is falling): all those devices that typically involve us in the action as more than spectators, playing on strong basic emotions, depriving us of critical distance: devices and effects rigorously rejected throughout the remainder of the film.

There are no villains in *Code Inconnu* (at least, not on screen, and not personalized), and no heroes or heroines. Every established character is presented both sympathetically and critically. We are never to identify, in the Hitchcockian manner, but we are never encouraged to look down on anyone, let alone condemn them: if we did we would be condemning ourselves because they are our reflections, whatever their social status, nationality, race. Nor does Haneke ever ‘look down on’ them: his camera remains throughout at the level of the characters. We are invited to study them, not coldly, like insects under a microscope, but sympathetically, so that in becoming aware of their errors, their shortcomings, their failures, we shall see and understand our own. The film, in short, encourages, almost demands, spectator involvement: we are invited into the film, but into the spaces between the characters (as opposed to identifying with specific characters). Hence

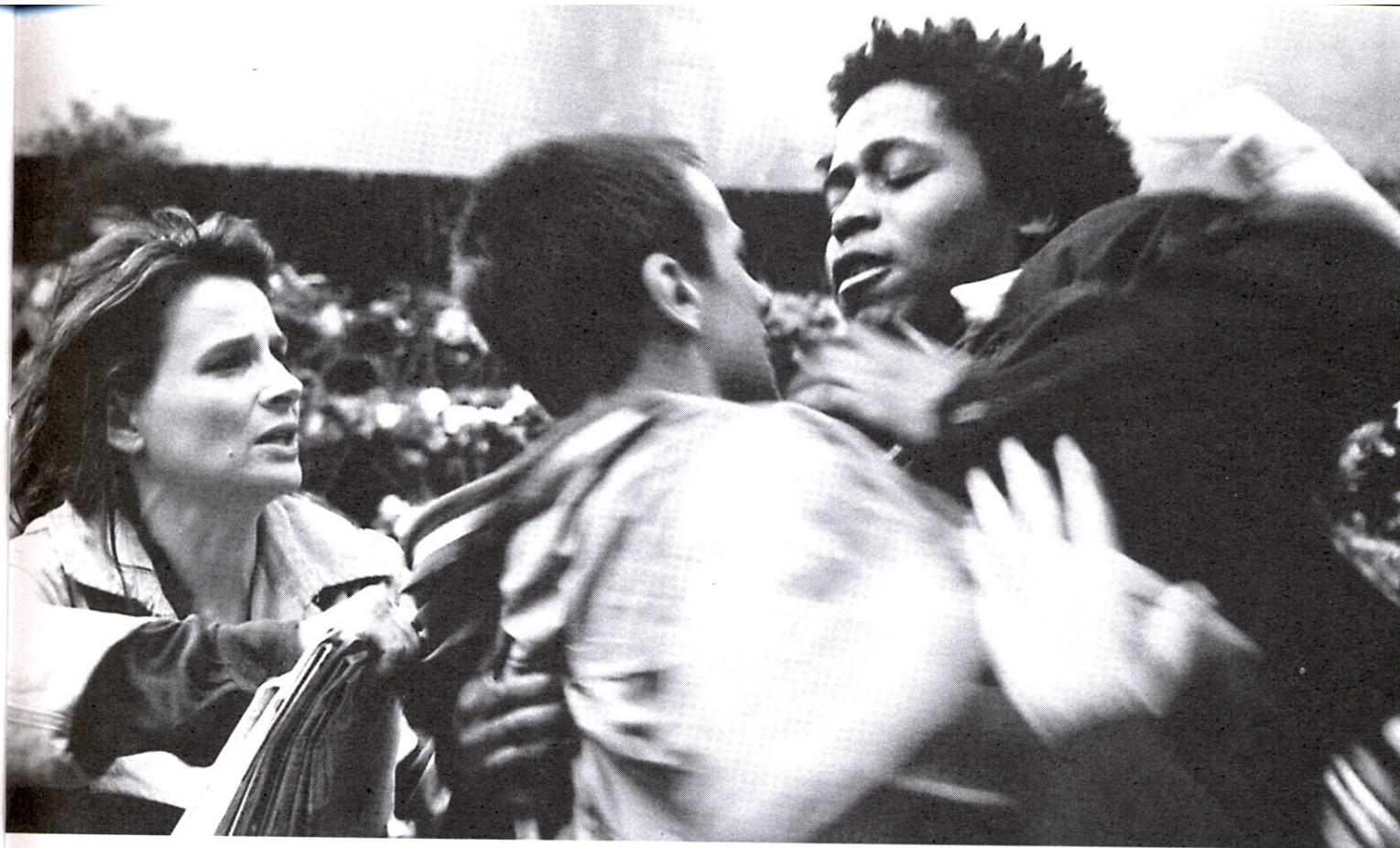
we become involved in a continuous dialogue: ‘Is that right? Would I have done that? Could I have done better?’

A ‘close reading’ of the entire film is impossible within the available space: it would require a book of at least the length of the BFI Classics series. I offer here a partial study of the sequences centred on Anne (Juliette Binoche), the film's privileged figure. She appears in 15 of the 42 sequences, and is central to most of those; of the other characters whose narratives we follow, Amadou, Maria and Georges figure in 9 sequences each (Georges as a voiceover in the two photomontages, and sharing 2 sequences with Anne, his lover), and Jean (Georges' younger brother) and/or their father appearing in only 7. Haneke's decision seems to me sensible and realistic, not only because Binoche is the film's only internationally famous star: her narrative is the closest to the experiences of the majority of the film's potential spectators (white, western, middle-to-upper class, the ‘arthouse’ audience), hence the character whose experiences, actions, decisions we can most readily relate to our own, the film's aim being educational without the least sense of bullying, indoctrination or didacticism. I shall begin, however, with a detailed examination of the first (and crucial) sequence-shot, which introduces all the major narrative threads (and is, incidentally, among the most astonishing instances of virtuosity in the entire history of *mise-en-scene*, without ever becoming obtrusive or self-congratulatory). I shall comment briefly on the relevance of the other narratives, and finally on the framing device, at the end of this essay. *Essay*: French, *essayer*, to try, to attempt; ‘...And every attempt is a new beginning,/And a different kind of failure’ (T.S.Eliot).

II: The first sequence-shot: analysis of a double disaster

One of the common definitions of *mise-en-scene* is ‘the organization of time and space’. Never have time and space been organized more scrupulously and complexly than in the film's first sequence-shot, which lasts 8' 09", traverses several hundred yards of sidewalk (crossing two sidestreets and an alleyway and back again), introduces four of the leading characters and refers to two others, sets in motion all the interweaving narratives, creates a totally convincing street scene in which passersby hurry to work, stop to greet each other, move from foreground to background or *vice versa*, interweave with the main characters, all without a single cut or any discernible ‘faking’.

Anne emerges from her apartment building, obviously in a hurry, and begins to walk away screen right; Jean calls out to her, she stops, walks back to him. She tells him that Georges is in Kosovo, left three weeks ago, her voice impatient, as if surely Jean ought to have known. She asks ‘What's your problem?’ (as two businessmen, background, pause to exchange a quick greeting and arrange a meeting before hurrying on). Everyone is in a hurry. Jean is angry because he's been waiting outside an hour (‘Your fucking door code's changed’, as if Anne had no right to do such a thing); he called, got her message machine. She tells him she was in the bath, couldn't hear. She was up till four o'clock (for the early reviews of the play she's appearing in), and is now dashing off to an audition (‘Go easy on my poor little soul’). They pass a flower stall, a background of magnificent colours. He's left his father's farm, couldn't stand him any more, needs a place. She goes into a bakery for pastries (‘You must be hungry too’ – she evidently hasn't had time to eat), hands him the paper bag which, within minutes, will be indirectly responsible for the arrest of a young black man and



Anne, her brother and Amadou: tensions erupt

the deportation of an illegal immigrant. They pass the walkway between the bakery (against which Maria will shortly be sitting to beg) and other shops, where a street musician, in the far background, has appeared and is drinking from a bottle, a few people gathering in front of him, then cross a side street. They pause on the street corner. Jean explains, almost angrily, that his father was renovating a barn for himself to live in when Jean was old enough to take over the farm. Anne tells him she thought this was his dream, but he insists the 'dream' was his father's, never his. (During this, a couple push between them, forcing them apart). Anne lends him her key and tells him the new entry code, but tells him there isn't room for three in the apartment (i.e., when Georges returns from Kosovo, expected within a few days). Perfunctory exchange of kisses-on-the-cheek; Anne walks briskly on, Jean turns back towards the apartment building.

He crosses the side street. As he approaches the walkway by the bakery, he passes a man standing, arms folded, at the edge of the sidewalk, back to camera, watching the street musician's performance, which has now begun; we can't see his face, but we may notice (it took me several viewings) that this silent spectator is black, and is wearing a blue shirt – our totally unobtrusive introduction to Amadou, who (besides playing an active part in what follows here) we shall later discover is one of the teachers of the deaf-mute children of the framing sequences (something my students had to point out to me), with a deaf-mute younger sister, and arguably the film's most admirable character. Jean pauses for a moment to listen to the performer, now singing, walks a little way towards him, pauses, moves back, casually tosses his crumpled paper bag into the

lap of the woman we later learn is called Maria, who is now seated (*hoping* rather than begging for money, she remains totally passive, as if ashamed and humiliated) by the window of the bakery, and strides on.

Amadou, galvanized into action, rushes after him, grabs him by the shoulder, and asks him if he thinks that was a good thing to do. Jean stares at him indignantly, pushes away and strides on, without a word. Amadou catches up with him. Jean sees nothing wrong in his behaviour, responding to Amadou's demands that he apologize to the woman with merely a repeated 'Fuck you'; the argument escalates into a fight. The manager of the store opposite the bakery (who also has an interest – street persons are bad for business – appears, denouncing both men equally as 'hooligans', no questions asked. Jean and Amadou continue the fight, screen centre, Maria tries to leave unobtrusively (sensing, perhaps, that, whatever the outcome, she will end up the victim), and Anne reappears, automatically defending her lover's brother (but, significantly perhaps, against a black man): 'Let go of him, are you mad? Why are you picking on him?' To which Amadou's response is 'Who asked *your* opinion? Do you know what he did, at least?'...To which Jean's response is 'He hit me' (implicitly denying the least guilt).

Trying to justify himself, Amadou goes off to get Maria back as witness (not considering the repercussions this might have – he has no way of knowing that she's an illegal immigrant, or even that she's foreign, as she has remained silent throughout, but he should perhaps have been aware that she was trying to slip away). Jean, seizing his chance, rushes off screen left, the scene ending in front of the flower stall, its final disasters acted out before a bank of magnificent colours.



Amadou pursues him, the struggle is resumed, the police arrive – and immediately seize Amadou. It is clear enough that Amadou appears to be – and, strictly speaking, *is*, the aggressor. Cop (to Amadou, being scrupulously fair): ‘What’s he done?’ Amadou (instantly defensive): ‘Wait, I can explain’. Cop, slightly sarcastic: ‘That’s a smart idea’. The hitherto suppressed racism emerges in the tone of that last remark. Amadou hears the tone, but makes an effort to remain calm and rational: ‘OK, if you’ll give me the chance’. (He has, perhaps, encountered something like this before). He continues: ‘This young man humiliated a woman begging outside the bakery’. An admirably precise, concrete statement of the facts, perfect within a perfect culture, extremely dangerous in our own (a black talking about a street person, to cops!). The second cop runs screen right to bring back Maria, who is attempting a swift escape from a situation which she knows, from her viewpoint, can come to no good. The shop manager (‘business’, the deciding factor) is rambling on (‘...sitting there, putting off customers. We’re not inhumane, but...’).

The cops take away Amadou’s (not Jean’s) ID card (because, although we later discover him to be an admirable and committed presence within the culture, he is automatically construed as an ‘alien’ because of his colour?), and proceed to drag him (not Jean) away, taking Maria too, as witness. He asserts his dignity (‘I’m coming of my own free will... You don’t need

to touch me’ – which is obviously true), but: ‘If you don’t comply, we’ll put the cuffs on.’ Struggle; blackout.

Commentary

The content of this first sequence-shot, at once complex (because it involves a number of characters, actions and responses) and simple (not quite, but almost, a banal, ‘everyday’ event, Amadou’s intervention being the one act that we might find unusual), is remarkably rich and suggestive in its implications – in the implicit analysis of cause and effect, of ‘what went wrong’:

a. Chance (One recalls the title of Haneke’s earlier, connected, *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*). Haneke allows full weight, in this ‘Chronology of a Minor Disaster’, to things beyond the control of anyone, the unpredictable consequences of simple actions. If Amadou hadn’t been standing in precisely that position on the sidewalk, he wouldn’t have witnessed Jean’s thoughtless, silly action, he wouldn’t have been carted off to the police station and Maria wouldn’t have been deported as an illegal alien; if Anne hadn’t bought the pastry for Jean, he wouldn’t have had the paper bag (emptied at that crucial moment) to crumple up and chuck in Maria’s lap...etc., etc... All obvious enough, but it’s important that Haneke acknowledges the pervasive element of chance in human lives and actions. We are (or, ideally, should be) responsible for our choices; but chance is beyond choice, and omnipresent in our

activities. If the film invites us to applaud anything it is surely Amadou's intervention – which leads directly to the worst consequences. This does not make the intervention any less morally admirable.

b. The pace of modern urban life Almost everyone we see is in a hurry, from the leading characters to the most casually presented passers-by: a typical contemporary street scene, no more, scarcely a remarkable perception, yet a crucial one. No one has time to *think*, to *reflect*, no one has any *distance*. Anne is hurrying to an audition, after a late night, Jean is in a very bad mood, homeless unless Anne takes him in, the police pounce upon the apparent aggressor, no questions asked. It is this constant sense of hurry, of pressure, that leads to

c. Action without analysis Within this sense of rush, no one is able to stand back for a moment and view the situation, the events, analytically, hence take full responsibility for her/his actions; everyone acts or reacts spontaneously from his/her position, without taking other positions into account. (I shall argue later that this is what the opening 'framing' sequence, the deaf-mute children, is about). One might argue that this is simply 'human nature', but one might equally argue that it is a part of our 'nature' that could be modified in the interests of communication and an understanding that transcends our own narrow, immediate needs. It is also clear that it is exacerbated by the pervasive sense of haste and pressure in contemporary urban living.

d. Priorities and prejudices Anne automatically sides with Jean simply because she knows him (it is not clear that she even *likes* him, but he is her lover's brother and therefore, somehow, must be the one she supports). Whether racial prejudice enters into this also we cannot tell: on the one hand, she is presented as an intelligent and generally aware woman, on the other such prejudices run deep even when *consciously* rejected. That the policemen are racially motivated is beyond question, though here again there is nothing blatant or crude in their behaviour (such as one might expect to find in a Hollywood 'social protest' movie). They seize Amadou, yet he is, at that point, clearly the aggressor (Jean just wants to get away), and the cop asks him 'What's he (i.e. Jean) done?' It is only when Amadou asserts his dignity by refusing to play the submissive, humble role expected of him that their bias becomes clear: finally, without having obtained any clear account of the motivations and issues involved, they arrest the black man and let the white go free. But there is perhaps a more basic issue involved: the police are, by definition, concerned, not with *morality*, but with *legality*: two concepts which may occasionally overlap but are certainly not synonymous. Jean, by tossing the crumpled bag into Maria's lap, has committed an immoral action but not an illegal one; Amadou, by grabbing Jean in the street, has precipitated a fight, 'disturbing the peace', breaking the law...

Even more interesting here, though so unobtrusive as to go unnoticed (by the onscreen, and possibly the offscreen, spectators) is the treatment of Maria. She never speaks, remains completely passive, tries to creep away – and it is Amadou who is responsible for having her brought back. My point is that no one, throughout all this, pays the slightest attention to her as an individual human being, even though she is the unwitting cause of the trouble (as well as its ultimate victim). This is not even because she is a foreigner (which no one can know at this

point): it is because she is a 'street person', a beggar, hence (having no significant position in the capitalist hierarchy) a *non-person*. In so far as she is noticed at all, it is as an *affront* to capitalism: begging outside a store might make potential customers feel guilty, might interfere with 'business' – that hideous word that dominates, defines, and currently appears to determine the future of, our culture.

I shall devote the rest of this article to Anne's progress through the film and its implications (with a brief remark about the framing sequences). But to sum up so far:

1. THE NEED FOR EMPATHY

(Or, perhaps, the 'Empathicalism' that Stanley Donen imagined himself to be satirizing in *Funny Face*, in order to inscribe Fashion as the 'Ultimate Good').

As Haneke's film suggests, this is the central social necessity and (in our contemporary world) a virtual impossibility. It also comes into conflict with what may be fundamental to 'the human condition', a concept which (in the West at least) has been centred on notions of the Self. I am not promoting here any grandiose notion of transcending Self altogether in order to enter into some new State of Being, a Nirvana. Simply, more modestly, that we should try harder to enter into others' viewpoints, to place ourselves imaginatively in their positions, to try for a moment to identify with their feelings, however provisionally. Could not Anne have been a little more understanding of Jean's needs, and he of hers, without entailing a sacrifice of the Self, merely a moment's sharing? Shouldn't Amadou realize, from his behaviour and manner, that Jean is under some kind of stress, and be content to curtail his moral crusade (admirable as its impulse is), which seems to degenerate somewhat into a matter of personal pride? Would it be possible for the two policemen (who are clearly not monsters) to bypass for just a moment their set of rules, laws, guidelines, and allow themselves to be aware of the scene's human content? (This theme is developed continuously throughout the film, and especially in the segments about Anne, merging at times with the examination of Anne's role as 'actress').

2 BEYOND THE 'PERSONAL'

Perhaps the film's ultimate distinction is the way in which, while seeing personal behaviour as the very basis of a workable society, continuously connects it to wider issues of the social and the political, demonstrating that, ultimately, the three levels are intricately interconnected, that, indeed, 'the personal is political'. It is all there, embryonically, within the intricacies of that first sequence-shot where, in the interests of analytical clarity, one may detach the following threads from the densely interwoven fabric:

i. Jean, social change, the generation gap, rural culture/urban culture. A basic failure of empathy: Jean cannot enter into his father's obsession that his sons (the elder of whom has already left, for the obviously legitimate ambition of becoming a recorder and reporter of international horrors) somehow continue the inherited tradition of farming the land. The father cannot accept that Jean belongs, now, to a different world, and that even the obvious bribe of a motorcycle, though initially seductive, will not keep him long from the more powerful seductions of the modern city (and, indeed, ironically offers him the means of escape). Haneke makes clear

that here there can be no question of compromise: each must simply try to understand and accept the other's position. I take it that the brief, enigmatic sequence-shot (No. 34) of ploughing represents the father's stoical acceptance – after his virtually suicidal destruction of his livestock in the wake of Jean's desertion – of his need, at least, to continue, alone. It is perhaps Haneke's scepticism (which I share) about *any* possible human future arising within the current manifestations of capitalism (the world into which Jean has plunged) that prevents him from offering him the equivalent even of *that* somewhat bleak possibility of fulfilment: Jean simply disappears from the movie, riding his motorbike to nowhere.

ii. Amadou and race. The city in which I live, Toronto, prides itself on being a 'multicultural' city, and to an extent the boast is justified. But only 'to an extent'. Yes, I see black men and white women (or *vice versa*) walking down the main streets arm in arm, obviously (and publicly) in love. But it is abundantly clear that 'business' (which currently dominates our world and determines our future or, more probably, lack of one) is overwhelmingly, the higher one goes in the hierarchies, dominated by the Great White Heterosexual Male. Of course, no self-respecting black or gay man or woman would wish to rise into such hierarchies, yet there are plenty of non-self-respecting black or gay men and women who also find themselves excluded from the top positions in that hideous palace of 'deals', corruption, self-aggrandisement and power, a 'leaning tower' that no one seems to dare to give a good shove.

If the film has an 'exemplary' character it is surely Amadou, and this comes across not at all as some kind of sentimental, condescending gesture on Haneke's part ('being kind to blacks') but as the logical result of his being an outsider, hence in a position to achieve precisely the kind of distance that is the prerequisite of empathy. That Amadou has a deaf-mute younger sister partly accounts for his presence as a teacher in the drumming sequences, developing a personal commitment into a wider social responsibility. But there is also his exemplary behaviour in the restaurant scene (sequence-shot 16, roughly halfway through the film). He is with a young white woman, to whom he is plainly attracted, taking her to dinner. She seems equally attracted to him, to the point of removing her watch and deliberately leaving it behind because he says he doesn't like it. Yet when, in response to this, he attempts physical contact, taking her hand, making his desires clear without coercion, she nervously withdraws. He makes no protest, conceals his disappointment, understanding and accepting that her readiness to discount race or colour does not quite extend to a sexual relationship. He shows no resentment.

3. INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

a. Maria

The next time we see Maria after the police take her away she is being led, handcuffed, to the plane that will return her to her own country (Romania). We still know nothing about her at this point, except that in Paris she is reduced to begging (from which she instinctually recoils). She is deported because she is penniless and has no passport, and for no other reason (she has harmed no one, and her offence is simply her reminder that, under capitalism, not everyone is happy). This develops the film's clear distinction (despite obvious overlap) between morality and legality: she could have been helped rather than automatically rejected. No one acknowledges her

as she is conducted on to the plane, no one pays any attention; a stewardess is laughing, but not at her. She is strictly a non-person, she seems not to exist for anyone but herself. Subsequently we learn that, in her own country, she is by no means penniless, homeless, helpless: she has a family (including her own children), an old, dark, clearly decrepit, house is being renovated for her. But we also see that the economy has collapsed: in a later sequence-shot (No. 17), we see her walking home a long distance from work, given a lift by an acquaintance, driven past a whole row of unfinished, skeletal houses, their construction abandoned. Later still (No. 29) we see her huddled in the back of a plane with other illegal immigrants attempting to move to a more stable, wealthy economy, and finally back in Paris, same street, different doorway, driven off by shop owners... Her demands do not go beyond the demands of simple human decency, a phenomenon quite alien to capitalist thinking.

b. Georges

Today, perhaps, the most obvious extension of the 'failure of empathy' is the grotesque Palestinian/Israeli struggle. As far as one can make out from western journalism, neither side seems willing even to consider seriously that the other has at least an arguable point of view, questions of territorialism, nationalism, and religion used to justify what seems basically a confrontation between two schoolyard bullies ('*You step down first!*'/'*No! You.*'), though with the odds on the side of Israel, which has the support of the President Bush's United States. Religion, as usual, is a basic stumbling-block (less than the dominant motivation yet much more than a pretext): that (to me) astonishing belief that certain writings produced centuries ago in a culture and an ideology utterly remote from the present (writings which must be read and interpreted purely within the beliefs and social/political conditions within which they were produced) have still a *literal* relevance to the world today and, beyond that, are still *true* (which renders that word meaningless). This is, to me, the height (and depth) of human stupidity and self-deception, though I still find that I am expected to respect the right of others to hold such ridiculous views. Well, of course they have the *right*, but do I not also have the right to tell them their views are, indeed, ridiculous? Meanwhile, because of the supposed 'truth' or 'revelation' of such writings, many innocent people have died variously horrible deaths, from the Spanish Inquisition through the 'witch hunts' of Puritan New England, to the present Palestine/Israel crisis (in which of course more than 'ancient texts' is at stake, though they still play their part, and more was 'at stake' in New England than the burning of alleged witches). Meanwhile, while this monstrous absurdity continues, partly at least because of the 'eternal meaning' of these texts, many innocent people on both sides are dying hideous deaths (the suicide bombers, with their appalling indoctrinated 'commitment', being as absurd in their deaths as their victims). It would be funny if it wasn't so appalling.

The extension into international politics in the film is represented, first, by Georges' horror pictures of 'ethnic cleansing' (a clear instance of a failure of empathy, in which one ethnic group wishes to exterminate another, for no reason clear to myself, but isn't ethnic difference often just a pretext? – I don't know) and its toll in human lives in Kosovo, later in the subsequent photomontage evoking Afghanistan and the Taliban.

He is the film's solitary 'committed' character. Georges' appearances in the film are relatively brief, and, like all the other characters, he is perhaps, to use a favourite Leavisian term, 'placed'. I say 'perhaps' because I am not certain what to make of the brief sequence-shot (No. 28) of Georges taking surreptitious photographs on the Metro: Is he taking pictures because what he sees can have political/social significance, or is he simply indulging himself in an obsessional activity? Haneke certainly sees Georges as one of the more admirable figures in the film, yet he is also shown as entrapped in his own single viewpoint (the view through the camera lens): in the crucial Supermarket sequence-shot (21), considered in more detail below, he is as unable to enter into Anne's viewpoint as she is into his. More charitably, one could say that he has by now witnessed so many deaths that he has become hardened to the notion that just one child may be in jeopardy. Yet, one might suggest, he could have listened to Anne, and consequently must, to some extent, share the guilt of Anne's failure to act.

To put it simply: *Code Inconnu* is about the difficulties of 'seeing the whole picture', whether the whole picture is a private relationship between two people or the political conflict between two nations. 'The enemy', therefore, is not an individual or even an individual country, but whatever impedes this inclusive vision: egoism, capitalism, nationalism, greed, the power drive... The film's achievement is that, while no one

within it (Amadou the nearest exception) is capable of reaching this vision, it encourages and enables the spectator to do so. That is what I meant by calling the film 'educational'. Its overall attitude evokes for me (and improves upon) two familiar tag lines. W. H. Auden's 'We must love one another or die' is, of course, glib, sentimental twaddle, but change 'love' to 'understand' and you arrive at the heart of Haneke's film. As for the famous epigraph to *Howard's End*, 'Only connect', one must say that Haneke makes connections far beyond the imagination and range of E.M.Forster.

III: About Anne.

Haneke's presentation (that central fusion of sympathy and criticism, held in balance with exemplary poise) of Anne plays very subtly on the two meanings of the verb 'to act' (to act in a play, to take action): she is, one might say, an actress who fails crucially to 'act'.

1. The Actress. We see Anne, in the course of the film, in a series of professional situations: auditioning for a film, performing in the shooting of the same film, auditioning for a play (*Twelfth Night*), appearing in the rough-cut of another, obviously quite different, film (the swimming pool sequence), post-synching her dialogue for the sequence we have just watched. I am not entirely sure why Haneke (and Binoche)

Anne, right, on the subway: race, gender and oppression



present her as an excellent film actress and a terrible theatrical one (her ludicrous overplaying of Shakespeare's Maria). We are not surprised that she did not, apparently, get the role, her rendering seeming unconsciously calculated to alienate her auditors. (We may also wonder why, after starring in a remake of *The Collector* on screen, she would be applying for a very minor and somewhat thankless supporting role on stage – simply to extend her reputation, her range?). The suggestion is perhaps that she can lose herself (even at an audition) in a movie (even an obviously rather bad one) but becomes uneasy and self-conscious in the theatre, with the prospect of playing for a 'live' audience, and we might relate this later to her behaviour during the subway sequence-shot where she is called upon to 'act' (in both senses) before an immediate live audience.

The extraordinary audition sequence-shot is concerned with the extremely narrow, perhaps ultimately non-existent, dividing line between 'acting' and 'being', already hinted at in the first sequence-shot, where in Anne's plea to Jean ('Go easy on my poor little soul') she is clearly 'putting on a performance'. The most striking moment comes when, about halfway through the single take audition, Anne spontaneously produces real tears, the actress 'living' her role, the phenomenon not extended to Juliette Binoche who is 'acting' the actress. In what sense exactly are these tears 'real'? Her director (whether it is the unidentified one directing Anne or Michael Haneke directing Binoche) is not really planning to watch her die, she has nothing 'real' to cry about, yet the emotion she is experiencing is clearly intense. The ambiguity is developed later in the film, in the pair of scenes from the Hollywood-style movie. The first (the love-play in the swimming-pool) turns out to be a sequence from the film (therefore 'acted'), but the second (the post-synching) swiftly disintegrates, amid uncontrollable giggles, into a 'real' but remarkably similar love-scene with the same actor (it scarcely comes as a surprise, at the end of the film, that she has locked Georges out of her apartment by once again changing the entry code). The film suggests that we in fact act all the time, that as soon as we have someone to engage with we to some extent 'perform' in our attempts (as in a theatrical performance) to get reactions, like Othello (in T.S.Eliot's famous formulation) 'cheering himself up' at the end of Shakespeare's play. Do we also 'act' to ourselves, when we are alone, 'putting on a show' to convince ourselves of something necessary or desirable at the time?

Anne and Action

I recall from my youth one of the most resonant lines in the Church of England Sunday service, 'We have left undone those things which we ought to have done' – which, presumably as the more reprehensible, *precedes* 'We have done those things which we ought not to have done'. So I ask my reader, Are you as disturbed as I am by Anne's failure to intervene in the case of the abused child in the neighbouring apartment? To get *really* personal for a moment (but why not?), I feel intimately involved here. I have recently become concerned about a cleaning woman in my apartment building who seems to me grotesquely overworked; ten days ago I talked with her and, as a result of the conversation, told her I would write a letter on her behalf to the management. I have just realized, while writing this piece today, that I have still not done so, partly (but only partly) because I have been so preoccupied with this film and this essay. (I am also afraid it

might rebound on her in some way, but I think that may be mere evasion). How many of us, I wonder, are in the position to 'cast the first stone' at Anne? Certainly not myself, though I think she is clearly wrong not to act, just as I now think I have been. (1) Anne is, in a sense, responsible for a child's death – as is the elderly woman who leaves her the note then denies she wrote it, afraid to interfere. If *Code Inconnu* is a call to action, then action (like charity) begins at home, whatever its relevance world-wide.

Anne and Empathy

An actor is supposed to be capable of 'thinking' him/herself into any role. Anne can 'become' another character during an audition (to the extent of weeping real tears), but, ironically, she has great problems with empathy in real life. The supermarket sequence-shot (No.21) connects this with her reluctance to expose herself by taking action. Anne is trying to enlist Georges in the matter of the battered child, aware of the need to act but unwilling to assume the responsibility herself (needing, perhaps, a *man* to take charge, to extricate her from a situation that troubles her but into which she is reluctant to plunge?). She doesn't take into account that he is just back from the horrors of Kosovo and still preoccupied with what he has witnessed and photographed. On the other hand, *he* seems unable to make the obvious connection ('Only connect...') between the unburied corpses of Kosovo and a single battered child in a Paris apartment. Later, we see him on the subway (No. 28), obsessively, surreptitiously, taking pictures: he is a photographer, the *metier* perhaps taking precedence over the content. The quarrel in the supermarket (a prelude to the collapse of their relationship) escalates out of each partner's failure to engage with the other's viewpoint.

Anne Acted Upon

Georges' brief subway sequence-shot is echoed by Anne's much more developed one (No. 38), among the film's most challenging, in which she is publicly humiliated by an aggressive young Arab. I rescreened the segment for my class and asked them what exactly were the rights and wrongs of the scene. Several (both male and female) immediately interpreted it from the viewpoint of gender and sexism: the vulnerability of an unaccompanied, attractive young woman subjected to male taunts and provocation. I of course agreed that that is certainly an issue, then pointed out that the students were reacting from only one viewpoint: what about race and class? They caught on immediately, the scene revealed as *also* interpretable from the young Arab's viewpoint: a well-dressed, comparatively affluent woman unwittingly inviting the resentment of an underprivileged man who also happens to belong to a racial minority. Anne's initial reaction (by refusing to react, sitting in silence as if the young man didn't exist), is perhaps the obvious way to behave in such a situation, but also arguably the worst: what could be more provocative and infuriating than being treated as a non-person? We discussed how else she could have reacted. By overt anger, denouncing the aggression and perhaps gaining the support of the other passengers? I suggested that the best response would have been to smile, and attempt to engage the young man in some kind of repartee, treating the whole thing as a joke, placing him on the same level as herself, establishing a complicity. My students doubted whether anyone, in that situation, would have the

presence of mind to do this, and they were probably correct. But no one could deny its attractiveness in the possible breaking down of barriers.

IV: The framing sequences

The sequences that introduce and end the film, with the deaf-mute children, trouble me, though I am not confident that I have understood them correctly. As I see it, the girl at the beginning is miming 'Fear', very clearly, and not one of the children in her audience can decipher it because each (I think) interprets her mime in terms of his/her own particular anxieties: a clear enough introduction to the film's pervasive thematic. But the mime of the boy at the end appears truly indecipherable, merely confusing in its seeming desperation. This seems to end the film on a note of ultimate despair: communication is impossible, the 'unknown code' that might save us will never be found. If this is a correct reading, it negates what I have termed the 'educational' nature of the film as a whole.

The temptation to despair (which, the world today being what it is, hangs over us as a constant threat) may be, perhaps, in Haneke, the 'other side of the coin' on which is stamped an impossible idealism, the desire for human perfectibility. I think we carry too much within us of our pre- and sub-human ancestry to achieve such perfection in any conceivable future. (No, I will not swoon in ecstasy over Kubrick's rabbit-out-of-hat 'star child'). But if we can never create a 'perfect' world, we might at least fight to create a better one., in which people can live, if not in perfect harmony, at least in mutual understanding and tolerance: a world that would today be achievable only through the most drastic and revolutionary social changes, a world of cooperation, not competition, a world in which we can all slow down and find time to *think*. If I read him correctly, this is what Haneke's films are about, and why *Code Inconnu*, his masterpiece to date, should be so important to us. But that ending continues to haunt and trouble me.

V: Postscript

'Thou met'st with things dying, I with things newborn.'

The (militant?) clatter of the deaf-mute children's drums is the only signifier of hope (itself ambiguous) Haneke permits himself and us at the film's end. Anne has brutally shut Georges out of her apartment, apparently ending their relationship without even a discussion, any tentative communication ended; Jean, presumably, is lost somewhere in the modern urban world; Maria is back almost where she started, just a few doorways further along, pushed aside once again. Only Amadou remains, the film's most aware character and a teacher, but he has dwindled to a figure in the background.

For the past few weeks, while immersing myself in *Code Inconnu*, I have also been rereading Nadine Gordimer's magnificent novel *The House Gun*. The final chapters, with their sense of a possible rebirth or new beginning centred upon the literal birth of a child, sent me back in turn to Shakespeare: not the Shakespeare of *Hamlet* and *Lear*, but the sublime, transcendent Shakespeare of the late plays, notably the last three acts of *Pericles* and, of course, *The Winter's Tale*. I have found the interaction among these works extraordinarily suggestive and fruitful. They have little enough in common. Haneke and Gordimer share an authentically complex and intelligent understanding of character and motivation, and the fusion of sympathy with a uniformly critical/analytical stance. Their difference might be summed up by saying that Haneke would never have sent me

back to *The Winter's Tale*, the tentative and qualified transcendence of the conclusion of *The House Gun* having no place in his work. And it is indeed ironic that Shakespeare's 'positive' is the 'great creating Nature' so magnificently realized in the poetry of Act IV – the nature that today we are inexorably stamping out with our pollution, our pesticides, our global warming, our deforestation. Perhaps Haneke is right – he is a great seducer into despair, which is why I admire him and at the same time try to distance myself from him. Given the current state of international politics, with the Bush administration clearly bent upon world domination, spreading a barren, corrupt and decadent 'civilization' across the globe, a 'democracy' in which millions live in poverty while a few glut themselves on useless, non-creative, non-fulfilling luxuries, a 'civilized' society that, at this year's Oscars, celebrated above all other films one of its most debased products (2), one might certainly argue that Haneke's pessimism (guided and controlled by his great intelligence, his insights, his deep concern with society and the individual life it should nurture but in fact frustrates and impoverishes), is 'realistic'. (Advance reports suggest that his latest film, *Time of the Wolf*, its title evoking Ingmar Bergman, whom it is difficult today to regard as a healthy influence, is concerned with the ultimate breakdown of all civilized order). Yet it is very dangerous to succumb to despair, however 'realistic': it can also become an 'easy way out' even a self-indulgence. Even now, in the U.S., a groundswell of protest and anger against the Bush administration is clearly developing. Little can be achieved without the existence of a strong, organized Leftist political movement, and the possibility of such a development seems for many reasons remote (money controls all, and who is going to pay for a revolutionary political party?). We need Gordimer's tentative, deeply moving progress toward a new hope, and, beyond that, the triumphant Shakespearean vision of the possibility of a new birth arising out of the ruins created by human blindness and stupidity.

NOTES

- 1 When I wrote this I broke off and wrote the letter. It didn't achieve a thing, the woman in question, whose English is poor, had misunderstood my questions and actually worked only eight hours a day for the management, her other work being elsewhere, hence in no way their responsibility. I received a very courteous reply from the person in charge of 'support staff'. This opens the question, however, of whether she is underpaid, hence forced to work overtime in other places at the end of a 'normal' eight-hour day. But at least I didn't get her fired (rather like Amadou intervening on behalf of Maria, which is, coincidentally, also the name of the cleaning person)... In any case, the praise or blame in this non-event goes to Haneke rather than myself: I was a mere intermediary. I record it here simply as an example of the direct influence certain films can have on one's actions, a phenomenon not often acknowledged. I feel that, since working for some weeks on *Code Inconnu*, I have become a marginally more aware, less self-absorbed, person.
- 2 Yes, I know, all my friends keep telling me, 'No intelligent person takes the Oscars seriously', and of course they have no value or validity (or even meaning) whatever in terms of any intelligent, enlightened or uncompromised attitude to cinema. Yet they still survive as an 'institution', as the American Empire's annual celebration of its cinematic achievements, hence of great interest from a sociological viewpoint, as a kind of barometer of contemporary American values.
3. Since writing this I have been able to see *Le Temps du Loup* in the Toronto Festival. I was thrilled to find that the film ends on precisely the (tentative, ambiguous) note of hope that *Code Inconnu* seems to deny us: the young boy's attempt at self-immolation, in protest against the adult world, is thwarted by the man who tells him that '...everybody will hear about this'. It is this promise that seems to produce the train that may be coming to the rescue of the survivors.

Apocalypse Then

LESSONS OF DARKNESS RE-VISITED

BY ADAM BINGHAM

"Life in the oceans must be sheer hell. A vast, merciless hell of permanent and immediate danger. So much of a hell that during evolution some species – including man – crawled, fled onto some small continents of solid land, where the lessons of darkness continue."¹

In the most recent publication of his *A Biographical Dictionary Of Film*, David Thomson curiously goes back on a comment he made in the 1994 edition and remarks of Werner Herzog that: "He is not the ideal documentarian,"² a statement that logically carries the (implicit) suggestion that Herzog doesn't make 'ideal' documentaries. Given the fact that Thomson fails to construct a convincing framework for such an assertion, never providing a model of who he believes an 'ideal' documentary filmmaker to be (much less what an 'ideal' documentary is), we are left to infer that what is actually meant by this is that Herzog doesn't make orthodox documentaries, and on this point I would whole-heartedly agree. Where I may differ from Mr. Thompson is in my belief that this is a very good thing.

Herzog's documentaries (if they can so be called) are, like many of his fiction films, among the most idiosyncratic and determinedly singular works the cinema has given us in the past thirty years. *Lessons Of Darkness*, however, may initially appear to be a more conventional, even uninspiring, undertaking. In contrast to works where Herzog has characteristically scoured the planet for small, out of the way stories to tell, finding subjects in everything from ski jumpers (*The Great Ecstasy Of Woodcarver Steiner*, 1973) to televangelists (*God's Angry Man*, 1980) by way of the world championship of livestock auctioneers (*How Much Wood Would A Woodchuck Chuck*, 1976), and turned them into typically Herzogian inquiries into the marginal, the eccentric and the dispossessed, a documentary about the effects of the 1991 Gulf war on Kuwait seems to hint at something more generic, much larger and more political. But nothing could be further from the truth.

The quote at the top of this article is from Herzog's con-

frontational manifesto (of sorts) entitled "*The Minnesota Declaration: Truth and fact in documentary cinema*."³ In it, he repeats what has recently been an oft-quoted remark: that cinema verite "Reaches a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants...there are deeper strata of truth in cinema, and there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth."⁴ This statement could point to Herzog's methods on many of his films, discursive or otherwise, but it seems particularly apt in discussing *Lessons Of Darkness*, for in this documentary perhaps more than any other, Herzog's truth has never appeared so enigmatic: or so tangible.

The particular method of *Lessons Of Darkness* could, broadly and not un-schematically, be said to be that it begins in abstraction and proceeds, over the course of its fifty-four minutes, to try and find something concrete, the deeper layer of truth. It is not without reason that Herzog has described the film as a work of science-fiction, an interesting observation for a so-called documentary, and one which implicitly seems to cue it in as a companion piece to his 1971 docu-poem *Fata Morgana*.

In that most remarkable work, originally conceived as a sci-fi film in which an alien report on a doomed planet, Uxmal, is discovered by Humans, Herzog ironically uses a sacred Quiche Indian creation myth against scenes (shot in the Sahara) that starkly capture the fallout of Western colonialism. In a land of detritus, wreckage and fire that strongly pre-figures the apocalyptic mise en scene of *Lessons Of Darkness*, *Fata Morgana* offers an increasingly despairing and disillusioned view of mankind as corrupter and polluter of an almost primeval landscape, set in poignant and marked relief only by the native people who wander aimlessly, as though lost, amid the technological flotsam and jetsam that has turned their (our) land into a graveyard.

It is demonstrably only a very small step from the picture on view in this film to the burning and debris-strewn deserts and oilfields of Kuwait witnessed in *Lessons Of Darkness*.

LESSONS OF DARK NESS

Although this work lies somewhere between the despondency of *Fata Morgana* (and such 'fiction' films as *Even Dwarfs Started Small*, 1970) and the more celebratory studies of human fortitude found in, say, *Land Of Silence And Darkness* (1971) or the more recent *Wings Of Hope* (1999) (the principal people on view are the firemen trying desperately to quell the infernos), it nevertheless reiterates *Fata Morgana's* awed disbelief at man's rape of the natural world. And, in the oneiric helicopter shots that dominate the more impressionistic first half of the film, actually takes this theme a stage further.

Akira Kurosawa once said of his 1985 epic *Ran* that the action in it plays out like "Human deeds as viewed from heaven,"⁵ and a similar stratagem can be discerned in *Lessons Of Darkness*. There is an overwhelming sense of distance and omniscience to the early scenes in the film, primarily in the way the camera, like a helpless god descended from the heavens, soars above and seems to linger over the destruction below. This is exacerbated by Herzog's use of night-vision shots of bombs exploding to represent the actuality of war; shots that anyone who has ever watched any television during wartime will have seen to the point of total saturation and thus de-sensitisation (there is a slight before, during, after structure to the film, but the before and the during occupy less than five minutes, with the after section interesting Herzog the most; a clear example of his unconventional approach).

This serves to foreground the particular spectator that Herzog has in mind for the film: namely those of us who have never been any closer to war than our television sets: those of us inherently distanced and dissociated (psychically at least) from the fact, so as to present and interrogate different viewpoints and perspectives almost diagrammatically opposed to the same ones we are repeatedly fed. In other words, he is exploring distance in experience and representation. The classical music on the soundtrack, from the subtle foreboding and understatement of Grieg and Mahler to the violence and physicality of Wagner, and the lack of anything in the way of diegetic sound, also contributes significantly to this effect.

However, just as the camera in *Aguirre, Wrath Of God* moves from a completely detached perspective to become almost another character in the film, so it is in *Lessons Of Darkness* that the overview of destruction we witness in the opening scenes gives way to a camera that, while still observational, nonetheless considerably narrows its focus to concentrate on the job being done by the firemen in extinguishing Kuwait's blazing oilfields. It is only here that Herzog's method clearly emerges, and that the real structure of the film falls into place.

I noted earlier that *Lessons Of Darkness* begins in an abstract way before moving into a more obviously discursive mode of address, and this alluded to the fact that the film is structured in two, contrasting, sections. The obvious juxtaposition is the aforementioned one between distance and (superficial) intimacy, but Herzog's own view of this work as a science-fiction film elucidates a further dichotomy at work: that between fiction and documentary. Anton Kaes⁶ has noted that, far from the fictive/discursive opposition structuring Herzog's career as a whole, it can in fact be seen to exist within individual texts, and in this respect *Lessons Of Darkness* can perhaps be seen as an archetypal Herzog picture.

The film, which opens on a quote attributed to Blaise Pascal but which was in fact penned by Herzog, begins as a grand

look at a world in the throws of destruction, and the almost lunar landscapes on view do little to help identify that world. More than the fact of Kuwait not being named at any time throughout this work (which serves to universalise the events on view), the fact of what we are seeing actually taking place on Earth is explicitly problematised. The first words spoken by the grave commentary (as usual Herzog himself) are: "A planet in our solar system," and, as a strange figure in white motions to the camera: "The first creature we encountered tried to communicate something to us." Here Herzog overtly makes the point that our world has been ravaged and destroyed beyond recognition, and that he, quite literally, has found himself, like Kaspar Hauser and the protagonists of *Stroszek* (1976) before him, adrift in an alien landscape.

The film then moves into a more overtly discursive mode of address, although quite what genre of documentary it becomes (or indeed is) must be a matter for some debate. One of the most interesting things about *Lessons Of Darkness* is the way in which it can be seen to straddle several categories of documentary filmmaking whilst at the same time never wholly belonging to any one. The theorist Bill Nichols, who has written on the documentary as extensively and persuasively as anyone (in his book *Representing Reality*⁷), has outlined four of what he terms "Documentary modes of representation,"⁸ and *Lessons Of Darkness* can, to a greater or lesser extent, correspond to any and all of them.

Briefly, and in a way that should not be taken as doing full justice to the particular complexities of the modes Nichols offers, the four conceptions put forward in *Representing Reality* are:

The expository mode⁹ characterised by an objective, reasoned and logical approach to an argument, often structured around the need for a solution to a problem and generally featuring a commentary by the filmmaker.

The observational mode¹⁰ wherein an argument is presented with as little filmmaker obtrusion as possible, facilitating unmediated access to the real world and featuring recurring images and situations. This mode also requires that ethical consideration be given, because if its nature, to whether the people in it have been intruded upon, used in someone else's discourse.

The interactive mode¹¹ wherein an argument is offered via various viewpoints and a preponderance of interviews. The filmmaker's hand is also generally discernible: i.e. the film obliterates transparency.

The self-reflexive mode¹² which asks questions about the actual representation of a subject and foregrounds a dialectic between filmmaker and viewer as opposed to filmmaker and subject.

It should be reasonably self-evident, even from the extremely compressed explanations I have provided, that aspects of *Lessons Of Darkness* correspond to at least the first three of Nichols' categories (I will subsequently demonstrate that it perhaps fits into the fourth more than any other), and that aspects of the film also clash with them. This, again, is something that could be said of other Herzog documentaries. For instance, *Little Dieter Needs To Fly* (1997), which tells the story of a German whose dream was always to become a pilot but who, when he finally qualified, was shot down and tortured in

Vietnam, features a philosophical and poetic Herzog commentary, reconstructions of how Dieter was treated in the jungle and interviews with him and those around him. Also, to connect back in to the observational style (and to tie in with Herzog's search for the deeper truth), there are scenes, such as the opening visit to a tattoo parlour, that were thought up, staged, by the director himself because they represented certain characteristics of the man he was filming.

To return to the central dichotomy of *Lessons Of Darkness*, the second half of the film is further marked out as distinct from the first, fictive, half by way of its "evidentiary"¹³ editing (cutting that forwards a logical argument), such as the shots of blazing and gushing wells answered by shots of pools, almost rivers, of oil on the desert floor, thereby denoting pollution. And the aforementioned use of much shorter takes with the camera right up to the firemen as opposed to the long held, omniscient, helicopter shots that predominate early on, which reinforces a sense of the effort needed to clear up such a mess.

In terms of another central aspect of *Lessons Of Darkness*, the second quote from Herzog's voice-over (about the figure trying to communicate with him) is also a direct allusion to a theme that runs through the film in several ways, and which links it quite explicitly to other Herzog films: that of communication, its lack, and the impossibility of normal human interaction. There are two instances in *Lessons Of Darkness* of interviews with women who have fallen victim to the horrific nature of war. One has consequently lost, through shock, the ability to speak, and stands before the camera (which reaches a sympathetic stillness on them in contrast to its almost constant mobility elsewhere) trying vainly to communicate her thoughts and feelings in feeble hand gestures.

The other has a child who has suffered a similar fate, and who stares blankly at both the camera and his mother: his principal means of interaction with others and thus his main link to the world entirely severed. These people, like the deaf and blind Fini Straubinger in *Land Of Silence And Darkness* (1971), have had the ability to communicate, to interact with others in any conventional way, snatched from them. They are trapped within themselves with little means of escape. In the fullest, most chilling, sense of the word, they are prisoners of war.

This theme of communication is, in a manner consistent with all self-reflexive

documentaries (Nichols' fourth model), further explored at the level of the discourse itself. In *Lessons Of Darkness*, Herzog shows a marked interest in self-reflexivity (a mode that goes back as far as Dziga Vertov and can also be seen in the work of Herzog's friend, and the director of *Werner Herzog Eats His Shoe*, Errol Morris), and the ways in which the war and its effects can be represented on film, and thus communicated to others. The juxtaposition of both fictive and discursive methods is one clear way of examining this, as the likening of the real situation in the film to a grand doomsday scenario clearly draws attention to the fact that choices have been made as to how best to represent the horrors on view.

The classical music on the soundtrack, like that which accompanies *Herdsmen Of The Sun* (1989), is also clearly there to lend a very prescribed tone and feeling to what is being seen. And, with the inclusion of Wagner, to perhaps suggest (as Coppola did in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) by using *The Ride Of The Valkyries* over the helicopter attack) a correlative to and possi-

ble continuation of the most aberrant and abject horror of the twentieth century: Nazism. Herzog's frequent use of slow motion, and even the simple cutting to an extreme long shot of one of the women victims, further highlights the connotative power at the filmmaker's disposal, and thus his ability to mediate and reflect on and to present and indeed represent whatever he films in a particular way for a particular effect.

It is my contention that Werner Herzog has yet to be fully appreciated, and even understood as a documentary filmmaker. Bill Nichols¹⁴ does not even mention him in his book, and the more recent *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book Of Documentary*¹⁵ only makes (passing) reference to him twice. This may well be down to the unconventional nature of his approach, not to mention the unconventional nature of much of his subject matter, but to my mind this should only strengthen the case that he be recognised and

celebrated now for his discursive work, just as in the 70s and early 80s he was celebrated for his fiction films (which were hardly any more conventional).

Lessons Of Darkness, despite its (ostensibly) more orthodox subject matter, is a detached, sober and hermetic account of hell on Earth. Herzog's interest is not in the politics of warfare, its whys and wherefores, but in putting a human and an ecological face on loss and desolation, death and destruction. If a film like John Huston's *The Battle Of San Pietro* (1944) gives us the full blooded frenzy and chaos of battle, something that has recently been brought home to people around the world as they tuned in and watched a war live on television, then this film is its resigned, ruminative mirror image: a reflective, considered cry of despair from a filmmaker who has never sought to engage the mind, but rather to stir the senses. To this end *Lessons Of Darkness* ends with yet another in a long line of Herzogian images of circularity and futility: a fireman approaches a gushing blast of oil (the fire having just been extinguished), and, as Herzog narrates disbelievingly, throws a light into it and starts the whole process anew. On this, and without words, the film closes. Truly, as the opening quote put it: "The lessons of darkness continue."¹⁶

Adam Bingham is currently working towards his Masters degree in film studies in Sheffield, England, and contributes regularly to journals like *Senses Of Cinema* and *Kinoeye*.

NOTES

- 1 Herzog, W in Cronin, P (ed) *Herzog On Herzog*, Faber and Faber Limited, London, 2002, PP.301
- 2 Thomson, D *A Biographical Dictionary Of Film*, Little, Brown, Great Britain, 2002, P.397
- 3 Herzog, W in Cronin, P *Herzog On Herzog*, PP.301-302
- 4 Ibid
- 5 Kurosawa, A in Norman, B *100 Best Films Of The Century*, Orion Books Ltd, London, 1998, P.200
- 6 Kaes, A in Nowell-Smith, G (ed) *The Oxford History Of World Cinema*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, P.620
- 7 Nichols, B *Representing Reality*, Indiana University Press, U.S.A, 1991, PP.32-75
- 8 Ibid. P.32
- 9 Ibid. P.34
- 10 Ibid. P.38
- 11 Ibid. P.44
- 12 Ibid. P.56
- 13 Ibid. P.19
- 14 Ibid. PP.3-266
- 15 Cousins, M & K Macdonald *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book Of Documentary*, Faber And Faber Limited, London, 1996, PP.3-395
- 16 Herzog, W in Cronin, P *Herzog On Herzog*. P.301

Vive le cinema

A READING OF *WHAT TIME IS IT THERE?*

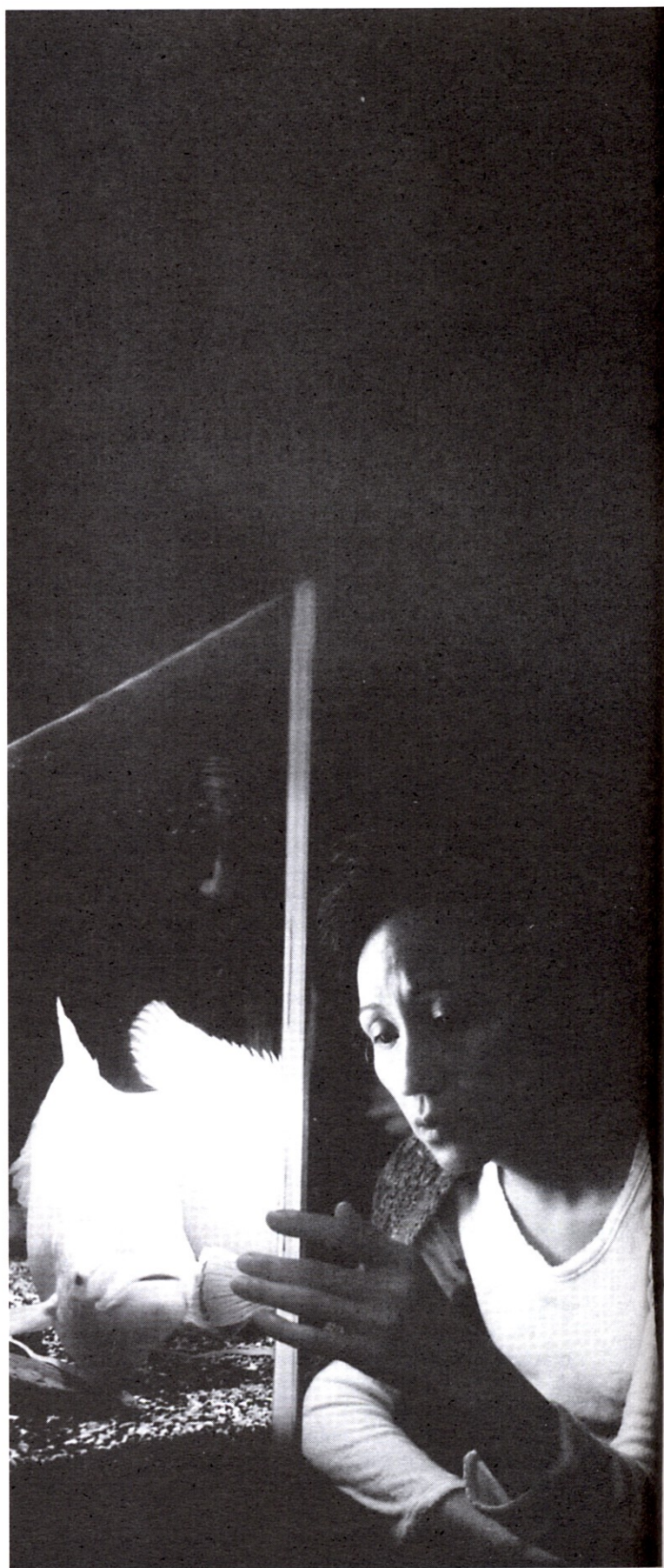
BY Aysegul Koc

As Taiwan makes the headlines these days in local newspapers of Toronto, regarding its ban on visitors from Canada due to the SARS outbreak¹, I have visions of a peculiar Taipei in my mind. In his film *The Hole* (1998), director Tsai Ming-liang depicts a gloomy, rainy Taipei, specifically the quarters under quarantine because of an unexpected disease that got out of control. Using the metaphor of the disease stricken city, Tsai Ming-liang powerfully presents alienated individuals, entrapped in claustrophobic isolation, who struggle to survive on the margins of the society.

Tsai Ming-liang moved from his birthplace Malaysia to Taiwan in 1977, to study at The Drama Department of The Chinese Cultural University. It was in Taipei where he started working in theatre and writing screenplays for film and TV. It was also in Taipei, in the Taiwan Film Archives where he was exposed to European cinema, the German Expressionists, the French New Wave and the Italian Neo-realism, which would fascinate him and help form his unique style alongside his movie-going experience with his grandparents back in Malaysia. Even though he says in an interview that he is somewhat an outsider to Taipei/Taiwan and that his films don't portray cities through their distinctive qualities², Taipei is engraved in my imagination through the eyes of Tsai Ming-liang, through his *Rebels of the Neon God* (1992), *Vive L'Amour* (1994), *The Hole* and *What Time is it There?* (2001). The last of these films will be at the core of this essay, for the sheer pleasure and admiration I felt, watching it three times in a row.

What Time is it There? hosts a family of actors that Tsai had been working with in many of his previous films. Lee Kang-sheng as Hsiao Kang (his real life nick-name and character name in *Rebels of the Neon God*, *The River* (1997) and *Vive L'Amour*) is a street vendor selling watches. His father is played by Miao Tien and Lu Yi-ching is his mother. Shiang-chyi, the young woman who convinces him to sell her the dual time watch on his wrist, is played by Chen Shiang-chyi. Set simultaneously in Taipei and Paris, the film loosely, unhurriedly ties together the presence of a dead father, the impossibility of sharing the trauma after the death of a loved one between the mother and the son, the overwhelming solitude of a young woman in a city that accentuates her foreignness and finding objects of desire on all parties' sides.

This modest and enigmatic masterpiece seems to be paced to the speed of Lee Kang-sheng's idiosyncratic gestures and movements. In his notes about the film (a few paragraphs that appear as 'special features' in the DVD distributed by



Widow and fish: reincarnation?

Wellspring), Tsai Ming-liang emphasizes that this film is Hsiao Kang's (Lee Kang-sheng) film and that he himself as a director is merely an observer. In an interview in which he was asked how he and Lee Kang-sheng began collaborating, Tsai Ming-liang recalls how he first saw him standing in front of a video arcade/illegal gambling house, where Lee Kang-sheng was apparently working as a guard watching for the police. It took Lee Kang-sheng a while to answer and accept to play a part in a TV film Tsai offered. On the set Tsai realized his reactions took slightly longer than everybody else's. Laughingly he recounts how he asked him to move a bit faster and how reluctant and stubborn Lee Kang-sheng was. Then Tsai came to realize, in his own words, "that there are preconceived ideas about how people normally behave and yet not everybody behaves the same way", and he began to be more accepting towards Lee Kang-sheng's acting, for the fact that that's just the way Lee Kang-sheng actually is³. Tsai and Lee Kang-sheng have become inseparable collaborators from then on.

What Time is it There? consists of a hundred and one static shots. On first viewing, intrigued by how perfectly bizarre and touching the film was, the fact that all shots were static did not catch my attention. On second viewing I was absorbed in how beautifully each shot was framed, how the elements of composition reflected a minimalist, colorful and poetry-within-ordinary style, reminiscent of a Joan Miró or a Paul Klee painting. By now I knew most of the shots were static but the elegantly choreographed movements in the frames made me doubt if there was a slight camera movement somewhere. Then I had to count. My eyes were a giant kino-eye detector that monitored the camera. The camera literally left the characters alone, often placed outside doorways, with no close-ups, no fancy craftsmanship of zooming out or dolly-ing-in to enhance emotional intensity. Not even a slight pan. The camera knew its place, so did the viewer, and respectfully watched the characters from an unintrusive distance. Although this is the way Tsai Ming-liang mostly creates the *mise-en-scène* in his films, in *What Time is it There?*, the distance takes on a new meaning.

The Father, Fish and a Cockroach

The camera's respectful distance can be associated with an empathy with the mother and son and their mourning in their own ways, after the death of the father/husband. The film is haunted by the presence of the absent father. His death leaves the mother and the son helpless and the loss grows into a force that drives them apart. As the mother seeks soothing in Buddhist rituals and a belief in the reincarnation of her husband – as a cockroach, or the fish that ate the cockroach-, the son, having lost his sense of orientation, clings on to the memory of a young woman whom he has encountered briefly, to whom he has sold his own dual-time watch despite his belief that it would bring bad luck because he is in mourning. The watch metaphysically ties her to Hsiao Kang and his father, who miraculously appears at the end of the film in Paris, in Jardin du Luxembourg, and pulls Shiang-chyi's suitcase out of the water with his umbrella, while she is asleep on a bench by the fountain.

The father's first appearance is the first shot of the film and it lasts almost four minutes. The camera is placed in the living room, to reveal three planes of living space, the dining table in the living room, the kitchen and the balcony at the end of the

kitchen. The father is alone at home on a quiet afternoon, except for ambient sound from the street outside. He's in the kitchen first, then sets the table in the living room, lights a cigarette, calls his son to join him. He then goes to the balcony, smokes and changes the place of the bamboo in a flowerpot. The next shot is that of Hsiao Kang riding in a taxi carrying his father's ashes, and holding a branch of bamboo out to the wind from the open window. When the taxi enters a tunnel Hsiao Kang talks to his father and lets him know they're now inside a tunnel.

Both of these shots suggest the transitory nature of life by the use of juxtaposition of warm and cool colors: the living room is lit in orange tones as opposed to the blues and greens of the kitchen and the balcony, the funerary urn in which Hsiao Kang carries his father's ashes is orange and he carries the green bamboo branch. His father calls Hsiao Kang's name in the first one and Hsiao Kang speaks to him in the second, in both cases there's no answer, but a sense of melancholy. Especially the father's being alone in the shared living space of the house establishes a feeling of lack, as we later on see the mother and son in the same environment doing everyday things and barely speaking, unable to communicate their pain.

Seen only in the first and the last scenes of the film, the motif of the father completes a circular pattern and marks the beginning of a life filled with a sense of loss and the end point from which a new hope for those who are left behind emerges. If we take the ceremonial masturbation of the mother as the ultimate act of longing, and the son's return to the house in the morning and taking away all the curtains and drapery from the windows, coming to the bedside of his mother, for the first time being able to show her affection by putting his jacket over her and lying beside her –the father's picture on the bedside is seen throughout this scene-, it is possible to think that the emotional block between them has been lifted, and the characters' lives will enter a new phase.

Tsai Ming-liang, in his notes on the making of *What Time is it There?*, mentions the death of his father in 1992 and how his father never got to see his first film. He then talks about how Lee Kang-sheng's father committed suicide in 1997, tired of fighting an illness. Tsai recounts an instance when they were in a plane going to a festival, he saw the melancholy on Kang-sheng's face as he was sleeping next to him; he remembers feeling even sadder. *What Time is it There?* starts from that melancholy and draws strength from some of the details involved in coping with the aftermath of the death of a loved one, like the scenes where Hsiao Kang is afraid of the dark and pees into plastic bags because he's scared to leave his room at night, a real life experience of Tsai's after the death of his own father⁴.

Though one could easily be tempted to read the struggle to survive in the father's absence and the hopeful ending as a struggle to overthrow patriarchy and ultimately succeed in doing so, I will not. I'd rather take this film as a celebration of life and cinema. The characters in *What Time is it There?* seek love and human connection, no matter how unlikely the place of search is. One can argue that in life the search for connection can take you to more absurd and surreal lengths than in fiction. In a Tsai Ming-liang film, the border between fiction and reality is deliberately blurred through a collective effort of actors, their life experiences and the director and his. One unforgettable scene that comes to my mind is in *Vive L'Amour*, where Hsiao Kang takes a watermelon, digs three holes in it

and uses it for bowling in the empty apartment that he secretly resides in. Tsai says that scene came out of a question he asked Lee Kang-sheng: "What would you do in an empty apartment with a watermelon?" The answer is what we see in the film⁵.

Just as deaths of both Tsai's and Lee Kang-sheng's fathers initiated the making of this film, a humanist father figure of the art of filmmaking, François Truffaut, to whom Liang pays homage through his use of *The 400 Blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*, 1959), helps form an intertextual link. Tsai also makes use of the theme music of Truffaut's film for the end credits of his. Moreover, *The 400 Blows* is dedicated to André Bazin, who took Truffaut under his protection and trusted in him when he most needed it, like a father. The male bonding is then taken further, as both Tsai Ming-liang and Truffaut worked with their principal actors/alter egos (Hsiao Kang/Lee Kang-sheng and Antoine Doinel/Jean-Pierre Léaud respectively) and followed their lives in an extended time period.

Truffaut and *The 400 Blows*

It is important to note that Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* is a semi-autobiographical text that is enriched with real life experiences, just like *What Time is it There?*. The longing for love and human connectedness of Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Léaud), the estranged little boy in *The 400 Blows*, bears a striking resemblance to that of the characters in *What Time is it There?*. Of all the cities in the world, Shiang-chyi goes to Paris. Of all the films on Paris, Hsiao Kang picks *The 400 Blows*.

Tsai Ming-liang names *The 400 Blows* as his all-time favorite film. In *What Time is it There?*, Hsiao Kang rents *The 400 Blows* by chance – as a woman behind him asks for a Grace Chan movie, another homage, this time to Grace Chan, and a reference to his own *The Hole* – just because he wants to see a film set in Paris, another detour he can take to connect with the young woman.

We see him watch two scenes from *The 400 Blows*, first is the spinning cylinder scene in which little Antoine skips school and goes to the fun fair, one of the few happy moments for him in the film. In his notes on *What Time is it There?*, Tsai Ming-liang expresses that the spinning cylinder ride is the one experience he shares with Truffaut and his film, and that as a boy he used to love this ride. It is also possible to spot Truffaut himself in this scene, as one of the on-lookers.

In another scene, Hsiao Kang is in bed and tears fall from his eyes. He sits up in the bed, grabs the remote control and watches the second scene from *The 400 Blows*. It is the unforgettable milk bottle scene in which a runaway Antoine steals a milk bottle, hides it inside his jacket and finds a dark corner to drink it. In close parallelism, in one of his efforts to set public wall-clocks in Taipei to Paris time, Hsiao Kang turns a garbage bin upside down, reaches for the clock, hears footsteps and quickly hides the clock inside his jacket and hurries inside a dark, mainly empty movie theatre where a film is playing. This scene is one of the most subtle instances in *What Time is it There?* in which the complex and interwoven relationship between life and cinema, between traditions of making films (The French New Wave and the contemporary auteur cinemas of South East Asia) is celebrated.

Another example of this celebration can be seen in the allusion Tsai Ming-liang makes to the last scene of *The 400 Blows* with his last scene of *What Time is it There?*. In *The 400 Blows*, the camera follows Antoine as he makes his escape from the

juvenile reformatory and runs all the way to the beach to see the sea for the first time. He walks along the beach and then turns to the camera. He gazes into the camera and the look on his face is captured in a freeze frame. In *What Time is it There?*, the father stands in the middle of Jardin des Tuileries in Paris, in the background there's a wall and beyond it in the distance a Ferris wheel is turning. He lights up a cigarette, looks straight into the camera for a few seconds, turns and walks away to the Ferris wheel till he disappears in the background. If for Antoine life, with all its miseries and joys, is just beginning and what lies ahead – a lifetime – is unknown, yet anticipated; for the father a life span is completed. The weight of his loss will be lifted in favor of life by the mother and son's coming to terms with his death.

Probably one of the most distinctive patterns by which Tsai Ming-liang pays homage to Truffaut and *The 400 Blows* is the presence of a now aged Jean-Pierre Léaud. Shiang-chyi encounters him in a cemetery, as she is sitting on a bench next to him and looking for a phone number in her bag. The two strangers sit in silence until Jean-Pierre Léaud asks her what she's looking for, first in French then in broken English. When she says it's a telephone number and goes back to her desperate search, he remains silent for a while. Then he looks at her again, takes out a piece of paper and a pen from his pocket, writes down his name and phone number for her.

Jean-Pierre Léaud:	"That my phone number."
Shiang-chyi:	"Jean-Pierre?"
Jean-Pierre Léaud:	"That my name, Jean-Pierre."
Shiang-chyi:	"Jean-Pierre. Thank you."

The two sit in silence for a few seconds more. Then there's a cut to Taipei. On the terrace of a building Hsiao Kang changes the time of a giant clock on the face of the building to Paris local time, with the help of a long stick. Once that is done, he treats himself to a glass of French wine.

Typical of Tsai Ming-liang's style, this out-of-the-blue encounter with minimal dialogue between Jean-Pierre and Shiang-chyi and the following shot of Hsiao Kang are a salute to the human soul, the longing for love and a desire to live even under most disillusioning circumstances, with a dose of humor. It is a fraternity bond between the spirit of little Antoine/Jean-Pierre, Hsiao Kang who watches Antoine, in tears in his room in Taipei and Shiang-chyi who walks the streets of Paris as alienated as Antoine in *The 400 Blows*. It's an ode to both life and cinema.

Cityscapes / Soulscapes

Although the two cities are not portrayed through their landmarks, tourist attractions and so on, they are not merely two urban settings. The fact that Shiang-chyi doesn't speak French, can't seem to get a hold of whoever she's calling on the phone, hears strange noises at night at the hotel, has to go through the discomforts of foreignness – the ticket control in the metro, ordering food in a busy French restaurant – the loneliness that she carries in this alien environment is emphasized much more than Hsiao Kang's in familiar Taipei. She's almost bruised by the city, its busy people in the metro who walk past her on the motorized walkway, an angry man cursing in the next telephone booth, and by a friendly face that refuses to share her longing for a touch.

By the consecutive editing of sexual attempts of all the characters towards the end, Tsai Ming-liang points to a collective loneliness and longing for interconnectedness. The mother's masturbation, Hsiao Kang's having sex with a prostitute in his car, the two women in bed in Paris are intercut. The accumulation of these shots together emphasizes the shared experience of alienation. Yet there's hope, by a return (Shiang-chyi's), by a jacket put over a sleeping mother.

Tsai Ming-liang aligns himself – and his films – with a specific tradition of filmmaking in Europe, a cinema of ordinary people, a cinema devoted to the understanding of the human soul. He is also nourished by Chinese and Taiwanese cinema, needless to say, but he himself often emphasizes his attraction to Truffaut, Bresson, Antonioni and Fassbinder. As much as he shares the sensibilities of these masters, his films are very distinctive in terms of making use of/incorporating a Western cultural filmic heritage and the fact of living in a post-colonial, 'post-financial boost' South Asian city. His films bring a unique sensitivity that gains strength from the historic, cultural and economic specificities of South Asian development, especially in the last couple of decades and how it affects the psyche of the people in South Asia, in his case mostly the psyche of the inhabitants of Taipei.

When I argue that *What Time is it There?* is a celebration of both life and cinema, I am referring to the transfusable, multi-layered relationship between life, cinema/film and the tradition of cinema (cinema's life). Our memory stores images, sound and all sorts of sensations, fictional or real. Life extracts so much from film (and vice versa), only to become fictional again in film.

As a fictional text, *What Time is it There?* is unaccustomed-

ly true to ordinary life details, or to put it more accurately creates a life-likeness in a very primal sense of the word. This also means taking a position against contemporary fast-paced, plot-driven commercial cinema, a cinema that skips the mundane unless it serves a purpose. When Shiang-chyi throws up in the washroom of a Parisian café, for instance, we see her bent over the toilet seat, she throws up for a while, then turns to the sink to wash her face but she feels another urge and goes back to throwing up more. There's no cut, we patiently wait for her to finish. Tsai Ming-liang's cinema is a cinema of patience, reflection, a subtle sense of humor and a cynical hope for life.

The writing of this essay coincided with a time in my life in which I could be any woman in a Tsai Ming-liang film who cries alone in a park. It could have been great writing material to generate hypotheses on the significance of crying women in Tsai Ming-liang films, but I will not do so. It is enough to smile a bit between episodes of my crying to light a cigarette, in a desolate corner of York University campus – the final scene of *Vive L'Amour* could easily be set in Toronto – and remember dearly the characters of Tsai Ming-liang films.

Aysegul Koc is a MA candidate at the Department of Film and Video, York University. She is the Toronto correspondent of *Altyazi*, a monthly film magazine published in Istanbul, Turkey.

NOTES

- 1 This article was written around the end of April 2003, when local newspapers like The Toronto Star gave the news of the ban as headlines.
- 2 www.indiwire.com/people/int_Tsai_Mingliang_020122.html
- 3 www.theonionclub.com/avclub3807/bonusfeature_3807.html
- 4 www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/02/02/tsai_interview.html
- 5 www.theonionclub.com/avclub3807/bonusfeature_3807.html

Hsiao Kang watches Antoine Doinel



...Simply Because You're Near Me

LOVE, *CHUNGKING EXPRESS* AND *IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE*

BY BLAIR MILLER

It is a restless moment. She has kept her head lowered to give him a chance to come closer. But he could not, for lack of courage.

She turns and walks away.

—Opening of *In the Mood For Love*

And all the while it rains.

On too many days it seems as though life is comprised of picking up the pieces of things gone wrong and trying to move ahead, continuing on with hope... I had no idea that the hopes and aspirations of people could shatter into so many pieces, all of them sharp and dangerous to handle once broken. That this whole process may never end only makes each piece that much more lacerating. All around our own bodies exists a time and place wherein individuals make promises to their selves and another about the love between them, only to experience the huge complexity and daunting aura of this love directly. The ways in which one faces this complexity often makes possible which sort of love can flourish, and/or fade away. For better or for worse our promises within love – and to it – hinge upon these moments. One reason intimacy tends to shatter so easily is because we are, many of us, afraid of that aforementioned moment during which we must face and admit the equally important strength and weakness of what it is we are feeling for another person. As such, many people are afraid of love. Afraid it might leave; afraid it might stay. Above all, though, they are afraid of themselves and the fact that access to their heart now also lies with someone else – someone who sees right through them, if they indeed love that other. This perceived vulnerability could lead the most sure-footed hero to crumble under the pressure they put upon themselves. Many individuals in this present world are immune to this malaise. They can still maintain stability while in love. Many are not so immune. As our world continues to become the place it somehow already is, this latter group grows steadily. And all the while it rains.

Yet there are so many beautiful moments left in the world, moments where the enduring strength of what we all share together shines through the physical and existential garbage which piles up in between us. The films of Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai are quite sensitive to this tension: That the world becomes darker, faster and more confusing and at the same time precious moments abound, if one knows where to look. In *Chungking Express* (1994) there are quick glimpses of it: a stranger cleans off another stranger's scuffed high-heels in a hotel bathtub with his necktie.

In both *Chungking Express* and another of Wong's masterpieces, *In the Mood For Love* (2000), forlorn individuals sway gently within a teeming, flowing crowd. They have lost out on love for the moment, and the shot composition in these sequences gives the impression that the individuals are living at a different speed than the rest of the modern world, their faces of glazed infatuation somehow thrusting them into a sort of suspended animation. These people who appear 'slowed down' are in love – for better, and often for worse. Do they move at a different speed because the nuances of love fail to fit in, or keep up with the blur of the modern world? In both *Chungking Express* and *In the Mood For Love* it is as though intense feelings of love pull the films' protagonists into a complex state, one that feels neither comforting nor disastrous. Instead, it feels like both at once. This is the enigma of love; that it can take us in both divergent directions, seemingly simultaneously. Wong's characters are pulled thusly – apart, and together – precisely because they are in love, the most complex emotional state within human experience. Following from this, Wong's films are almost equally complex because they are about love. Utter despair dances with triumph, and neither seems clearly in vision until they are gone. Lovers, or lovers to be, fumble about, trying to connect with each other. 'Coincidences' are rife in Wong's work, in strange ways. As another policeman prepares for a much-anticipated date with a fast food waitress in *Chungking Express*, he dresses in clothes that same waitress hid in his apartment days earlier. The cop seems not to notice that the clothes were planted, but the tim-



ing for him putting them on is auspicious to say the least. Does he know? Doesn't he? It is somewhere in between; *something* knows. Love. To this end, love in Wong's films shall be approached under several major themes indicative of modernity: a preoccupation with the past, and thus, with loss; the residual emaciation of our abilities of articulation, and the overarching result of said phenomena – a harsh solipscism which makes it increasingly difficult to connect with others, even when we love them. Let us walk through the films together, then . . . and bring your heart with you. If Wong's films and myself are correct, perhaps it will be in familiar company.

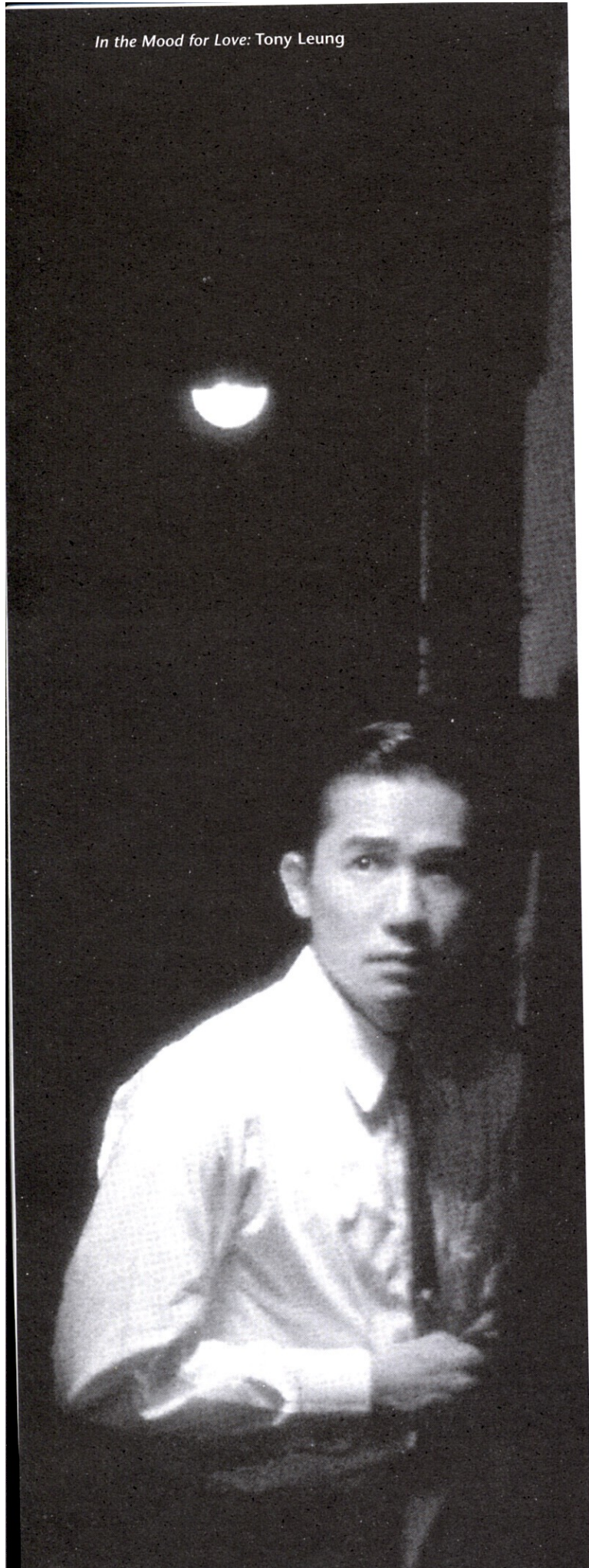
The Labour of Love: Is There Room For The Critic in Film Criticism?

That this essay is quite personal and more intimate in structure than one is accustomed to is only because of my beliefs around why people such as myself even bother to write about film: That movies can/do play a role in either affirming or altering who we all are; somehow they can even satisfy both these roles simultaneously. In many senses, then, writing about film often becomes a sort of therapy for myself, such that I can actually work through some of my own foibles and the temptations towards egotism put forth by the soft loneliness that follows everyone closely, waiting to impose itself at the first sign of our weakness. Thus the act of writing about a film is ideally connected to what individuals get out of seeing one: That it can be with them, indefinitely, through confusing moments and perhaps even shed some light on such moments whether those watching realize it or not. This notion follows in the vein of two critics – Robin Wood and Jonathan Rosenbaum – both of whom have taught me (albeit unintentionally and, in the case of the latter, wholly indirectly) that the soul of the writer/viewer and/or his or her sociopolitical concerns belong within film criticism just as much as all of everyone else's juicy and brave assertions within the field belong there as well. I often feel a perceived assumption that unless one is of 'famous' stature, or something like it, they ought not to be at a point where glimpses of their own memoirs should exist

within their criticism, such that those 'inexperienced' few who do so risk being seen as pretentious and/or vain. But one must wonder: How dangerous is such a notion? Perhaps a great deal of pitfalls could have been avoided in academia and critics' circles were those involved willing to give direct thought to the psyche(s) that forged so many of the documents we all now hold dear as part of our own visions of the world – a nuance of a critic's growth that is very much taken for granted. (For example, were I to have known Pauline Kael, or at least been privy to some of her more personal textures and influences, perhaps I would better understand her need to be so vindictive so often, such that some of her reviews are difficult to penetrate while the conscientious trees become lost within the fiery forest.)

So I have thusly included some of my own ruminations about love – with some trepidation at being labeled in ways similar to those mentioned above – because it is one of the ways in which I think criticism should be done, and far be it for a contemporary critic to let one's personal ethics inside their work, past the unruly and tired guards of 'theory', strong and insightful as they may be. After all, films are about things, and to exclude the matters in the world upon which films touch is to volunteer to be mired in 'the filmic text', but only insofar as falsely objective film theory can allow. A critic's work, if true, is a labour of love; love is not ostracized, it breathes amongst the lines.

This is not meant to place any sort of criticism above others. Rather, there are simply a number of sorts of ways to approach film criticism, and a more intimate approach, it seems, is few and far between within a mode of thinking that (hopefully!) should be about openness, reinvention, diversity of views, and, of course, trying to be true to one's own convictions and visions around life and the movies in it – as opposed to writing about film in ways not necessarily endorsed by the writer because he or she is stuck in a restrictive and habitual flight pattern of pasting theories upon films. Can it not be possible to challenge our own selves while we see what we see in a film? Wong's films challenge the ways I think about love, and I believe these challenges to be at the core of the films



themselves. I wish only to talk about something inherently personal within a broader concept in the humble hope that the challenge may be passed along to those who were similarly gripped by his work – or perhaps even to those who feel something entirely different – because we all have love inside of us, and it behooves even the staunchest of scholars and/or critics to approach this fact at some point in their career.

The Ghost: Love in Wong Kar-wai

And so I write, here, about perhaps the most confusing set of moments: love. Not to be undervalued here as well is love's intimacy with film – particularly films by Wong Kar-wai and how they come to personify the difficulties and fears of being in love with another member of our species. Love brings out the whimsical texture of our lives; this texture breathes throughout Wong's work.

Seeing a good film is like encountering a special ghost. Seeing many of Wong Kar-wai's films is like encountering the most special of ghosts – love – as it haunts a place where it may no longer be welcome, the modern world. Indeed, love is like a ghost in Wong's films – paper-thin, fleeting and often nothing more than an apparition that brings a rush upon being noticed and leaves a suffocating void once it floats away against one's wishes. Then, those affected find themselves doubting the senses of their own heart, transfixed upon a past experience they may never get to understand, like someone who has seen a ghost. Did I really see what I thought I saw, once love has left? Did it really make me feel the way I felt, or was it just the adrenaline? Was it as beautiful as it looked, or was it a threat in disguise? Was it even there in the first place? This is the confusion and trauma left behind by ghosts, and a fair number of Wong's characters are traumatized in this fashion, blinded by their remembrance of the past, by their ironic pain of having once been part of something so beautiful and mysterious.

Wong Kar-wai is one of the rare masters of drawing out the effervescence of this fear, the blissful intoxication of love. What truly distinguishes Wong's films is their ability to encapsulate both the triumph and the unquestioned agitation that love can imbue in any of us. The dance-like and poetic editing and the referential irony of the dialogue indicate that even his films "know what it feels like to be brokenhearted," as one of his characters puts it, to the extent that one begins to consider if being in love is about knowing what that feels like. It is all over the faces of the characters in his films; it resonates throughout every facet of their lives. This is especially the case, for myself in particular, with respect to *Chungking Express* and *In the Mood For Love*. Many of the themes and filmic nuances that shall be touched upon below regarding these two films can easily apply to a multitude of Wong's films. However, my initial access to Wong's work has been through *Chungking Express* and *In the Mood For Love*, and they remain, for me, the most apt examples of his examination(s) of the innate tragedy of love in the modern world. In this regard I have attempted to parallel the bubbly and poetic tone of Wong's narratives here with my writing, such that my own loves and fears may mingle with the subject at hand and provide a rich texture for ruminations around love. There are no answers with love, only thoughts and feelings. And all the while it rains.

Both *Chungking Express* and *In The Mood For Love* are films about people falling in and out of love. The former is an ensemble piece, weaving together seemingly separate lives. The latter is very similar. During *In the Mood For Love*, two markedly separate

lives come together, but their falling in and out of love is much more potent and wrenching than any of the relationships in *Chungking Express*. Either way, the romantically doomed protagonists in *Chungking Express* and *In the Mood For Love* live thusly challenging lives, representing a still and tired grace that calmly resists the clutter and rush of the modern cities that surround them. This is immediately apparent during the slow-motion sequences in either film. As policeman No. 223/Takeshi Kaneshiro, No. 633/Tony Leung Chiu-wai, and the blonde-wigged woman/Brigitte Lin attempt to be a part of their surroundings in *Chungking Express* the crowd streams past them in a blur.ⁱ During *In the Mood For Love*, Chow Mo-wan/Leung and Su Li-zhen/Maggie Cheung Man-yuk are often portrayed moving in slow motion – exhausted and lost as they get closer to each other's hearts. If one watches Chow's cigarette smoke slowly rise, spread out into the stale air and vanish in slow motion, it's as though one is watching love fade away from his soul, even though he wants it to stay. (As Marx once put it, "All that is solid melts into air.") These slow motion depictions coincide with the haunting musical scores in both films and the impressively measured performances by each of the principal actors, in order to give the immediate impression that the characters are indeed lonely and grief-stricken. Yet these are love stories. How can both these seemingly opposite modes exist so successfully in Wong's films? As we shall see, a simple, solely peaceful form of love has either dwindled away or been a collective dream of ours all along. In this vein, what now passes for so many of us as love is not an easy undertaking. In fact, it plays all too easily upon the background of fear and anxiety that is ushered further and further in as we strain to become more 'civilized,' or modern. Indeed, it is precisely the city and the modern crowd that the slow grace of the characters is at odds with. Their auras fight against the streaming blur of neon lights and the subtle cacophony of the city.

What is it about love between two people these days that it can live so closely to fear and grief? Extremes, especially emotional ones, exist in close proximity to one another. Lust/anger. Certainty/doubt. Pleasure/Pain.ⁱⁱ Pain/numbness. Fear of loneliness/the comfort of love. If the modern world is about anything, it is about extremes. Thus, a contradictory mode of love – one which can embody fear, comfort, anxiety, and the swelling-up of untreatable happiness one gets within mutual love – may very well be at home in the modern world, as both juxtapose extremes as though they are meant to match. Perhaps, as Wong gives evidence of in *Chungking Express* and *In the Mood For Love*, these opposites are meant to match. But is this description of love the same as the love we all dream about when we think of someone who is precious to us? A conundrum exists within what we understand to be called 'love' since its perceived stability, atemporal lifespan and reassuring safety are at odds with an ephemeral and scary modern world that is damaged by time: Has love passed the human world by? As it is stated in *In the Mood For Love* after Chow and Su's love has flickered out:

The era has passed. Nothing that belonged to it exists anymore.

Hopefully, it is only that sort of love – the stability and safety, "undying love" as No. 233 implies with the password to his pager – that has been outstripped by our own civilizing, our modernity. In other words, love may very well be made to exist

in less familiar forms these days, forms more fleeting and contingent, forms more difficult to deal with on a recurring basis. To be more specific, if modernity is always changing, always moving on, then things in it must be moving on as well – even love. And all the while it rains.

The Modern: Is There Room For Love?

It takes time to get used to things.

—No. 633, to Faye

Things made conscious become stale and self-imitating pretty quickly.

—Bill Pope, ASC

Knowing me doesn't mean keeping me. People change.

A person may like pineapple today, and something else tomorrow.

—Blonde-wigged woman

It takes time to get used to things. When I was more in love than I've ever been, with a woman whom I have since been separated from, it took me a while to do that – to get used to it. It seemed as though just when I was finally growing accustomed to her, she was gone. But I brought her departure upon myself, even though I didn't notice it at the time. In fact, I hadn't noticed much at all about her and I back then. Why didn't I notice? Once I did, why had our love already expired like the cans of pineapple in *Chungking Express*? If I wasn't looking at us, what was I doing instead? Where was it that I was looking? She's gone ...and the whole thing felt so far off in the past so quickly, like when a face on the subway catches your eye and even though the moment seems frozen in time, they've already gotten off the train three stops ago. And all the while it rains.

There has been a fair amount of urban study undertaken in order to examine how our cities are made in the image of our conception of the human body. Indeed, veins, arteries, brain and other corporeal terms are part and parcel of discussions about the functions of a large metropolis. One subtler aspect of the body that has been relatively overlooked in this regard is cell replenishment. As our outer skin dries out and flakes off, the human body creates new cells to replace them. In time, there is nothing in us that was also there a time ago. This is mere biology; it must occur in order to survive. Yet, true to form, a city undergoes a similar constant transformation. Charles Baudelaire often wrote about a Paris that he could not recognize from the day before. One needs only to go on several walks around their own neighbourhood to observe the staggering speed at which humanity has learned to tear down old things and erect new ones. The impact this must have upon our psyches was not lost on people such as Baudelaire as they wrote about feeling out of place, abandoned and lost – at home. What they are lost *within* is what most affectionately call progress. Walter Benjamin, a German philosopher in the early 20th century who was deeply influenced by Baudelaire, has this to say about progress, as he places it within the context of our modern understanding of history:

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open,



his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.ⁱⁱⁱ

Such a view of the influence of progress/modernity upon our actual emotions themselves is a distressing one, but the unease it generates is likely only so due to the lucidity of the image Benjamin has drawn. If we are all amidst constant, jarring change within our environment(s), then we are all indeed in the unenviable position of the angel – somehow waiting for a coming redemption while stuck looking backwards at what begs to be rescued. Still, what is most impressive about Benjamin's thoughts is the emotional content that they ascribe to our experience of this world. Imagine how afraid the angel must be ...consider how afraid we all are.

Our fears can impede our view. Love is not an exception. In the sense that Benjamin's account of the angel is about fear and trauma within progress, it is also about those feelings mitigating a view backwards as we move forwards. It should follow that our most valued part of ourselves – our heart – is no more immune to being stuck in the past than the angel caught up in the maelstrom. Our hearts cannot force their attention away from what once was, from what has been lost. Stemming from this, each character that falls in love in *Chungking Express* and *In the Mood For Love* has been brought into a new love through loss. No. 223 feels compelled to court the blonde-wigged stranger in the bar because in his drunken despair over the now-definite loss of his ex-girlfriend May he has pledged to fall for the next girl entering the room. The blonde-wigged

woman herself is only in that same bar, presumably, out of despair over her being abandoned by her cohorts in a drug smuggling run. No. 633 meets Faye because he is always buying his now ex-girlfriend food at the Midnight Express where Faye works. Faye herself only gains access to No. 633's apartment because of his ex-girlfriend's parting letter to him, which makes his loss official. In *In the Mood For Love*, the love between Chow and Su is sparked during their reenactment of the affair going on between their spouses – surely a large loss for both of them. What makes love in both films so hugely tragic is that once the opportunity for new love surfaces, those involved are too concerned with what they have lost to even notice their chance for redemption with a new love. As the *Chungking Express* train itself comes and goes from the station, dropping off exciting possibility with new arrivals, those who stand to redeem their love are too preoccupied with the departures. The blonde-wigged mistress survives an attack on her only by being aware of who it is behind her – literally. No. 233 is a man who is so lost in foggy faces from the past that he spends a night on the phone calling women from his youth, even as far back as a classmate from the fourth grade. His pager will not even give him any reassuring romantic news until he plans to leave it behind on the fence. These days, love will not show itself without loss, without a steady gaze at the past. And all the while it rains.

A preoccupation with the past trumps what may come within *Chungking Express* and *In the Mood For Love's* central relationships due to how those relationships came to be. The two thematic songs between No. 633 and Faye are entitled "California Dreamin'" and "Dreams." The latter song's chorus ends with the line "you're a dream to me." What is as fleeting as a dream? Perhaps the most intimately filmed scene between two characters in *Chungking Express* is the sequence during which No. 633's stewardess girlfriend and he are together in his apartment, lying in bed, chasing each other, playing games, being in love. Yet this scene is but a memory, showing how prominent the past can be within love. What complicates the situation further is that Faye essentially becomes a palimpsest



of the stewardess. By sneaking into No. 633's apartment and replacing items in it with items she has brought, Faye feeds into No. 633's desire to treat the apartment like a sort of venue for the past. Even before Faye first sneaks in, No. 633 talks to his apartment as though he were either talking to the stewardess or dealing with the loss of her love. Yet when Faye starts to tread in all the same spots as the stewardess, doing much of the same things, she becomes a fleshy ghost for No. 633 before he even realizes it. At first Faye merely replaces certain items but then her 'inadvertent' replacing of the stewardess herself becomes more noticeable as time goes on, intensifying as she erases a message the stewardess left for No. 633 on his phone and gathering more steam as No. 633 massages Faye's legs like he would the stewardess'. Once No. 633 claims that the stewardess bought the CD in his house when it was in actuality left there by Faye the transformation for Faye seems close to total. But if love is innately tragic in Wong's films, the role for Faye as an echo of the stewardess is only complete once she too leaves him behind. This repetition of abandonment for No. 633 is heart wrenching, especially given the exquisitely forlorn performance of Tony Leung. It has all happened again, with someone who even seems the same as the past lover. Even upon her return, Faye resembles the old flame more closely, with long hair and dressed in the same uniform. This way, No. 633 never even gets to look forward. Like the Angel, he is stuck. Earlier in the film, No. 633 returns to his apartment to find it flooded. He believes the apartment to be crying for his loss. As the last shot in the sequence plays out, his old blue sandals – which Faye had since replaced with orange ones – float out from behind the sofa. We are always subject to the past, run by the fear of its recurrence. No. 633's apartment weeps for the past, in fear of the future. That this story takes place in such a condensed, ephemeral urban milieu is no coincidence. And all the while it rains.

In *In the Mood For Love* experiences a similar move to drape new love on top of the past one(s) as Chow and Su's hidden love blooms in the corners and seclusion of neighbouring

apartments at the top of a set of narrow, tattered stairs. Much like in *Chungking Express*, those involved seem not to notice their growing love for each other because they are preoccupied with what has already been. In the case of *In the Mood For Love*, however, the love itself is sparked by the role-playing that takes place as Chow and Su attempt to understand their spouses' mutual affair through reenacting how they assume it would have occurred. The present as palimpsest of the past being the *direct* means through which Chow and Su's love is born, along with the fact that *both* of them engage in the role-playing, makes the tragedy of their love noticeably more intimate and intense than either relationship in *Chungking Express*. The intermingling of past and present is apparent quite early on in the film, during their first attempt to reenact the affair of their respective spouses. Su asks, "I wonder where it began," in reference to the affair – to which Chow replies, "I understand. After all, it already happened. It doesn't matter who made the first move." Upon viewing the scene and the outstanding performances given by Leung and Cheung, it becomes obvious that they could just as easily be talking about the love that is growing between the two of them. The choice of songs during their shared scenes add to the anxiety and focus on the past, "Quizas, Quizas, Quizas" translating roughly into "Maybe, Maybe, Maybe" and "Te Quiero Dijiste" meaning "You Said You Loved Me." But, once again, the focus upon the past is not made complete until later on in the film, when Chow states that he had wished that he and Su would not have turned out like their spouses – like the past – but that they have indeed become the same thing. It should be recalled, here, that this tragic orientation towards the past epitomized by Benjamin's angel of history is imbued with progress, with modernity. And so Chow and Su meet through the purchase of a rice cooker – an item whose technology everyone in either apartment is clearly impressed by. True to form, once Chow and Su's love has passed into darkness Chow is alone, in his kitchen, staring sadly at his rice cooker as though it (or perhaps what it signifies) holds the answers.

Faint Messages: Is There Room For Articulation?

... And everything he sees is blurry and indistinct.
—Closing line of *In the Mood For Love*

Some of my fondest memories between that aforementioned ex-lover and I are actually captured in print. This is because we were both very good at writing our thoughts, and these thoughts always seemed so much sweeter when mitigated by paper and the time that elapsed before the addressee read it. Like a strange star gone supernova which a star-gazing child is only privy to after the thousands of years between its inception and the moment when its light first warms our planet, loving thoughts in a letter carry with them some strange eerie beauty once the recipient's eyes finally get to look upon another's heart spilled out in ink. It is no coincidence, then, that the next love I had, Amanda (a woman I should not have gotten so close to while I was still mired in the wreckage of that other lover and me), never really understood many deep, dark things about me until after we had parted ways and I sent her a letter trying to explain myself. (Furthering the irony of love, the two of us are now closer than ever – in small part because of that same letter, and many other attempts at articulation.) To evoke Benjamin once more, one has not yet truly witnessed the growth of such a mind until one sees how he felt himself out, drawing his own limits – and passing them – within his letters, many of which have been published in a collection of his correspondence with Theodor Adorno. I never really overcame the complexity of T.S. Eliot's work until I read a collection of his letters to his wife. Reading the words of men who grow as they partake in that forum, I finally felt like I understood them.

So, modernity and/or progress play a role in framing which sorts of opportunities one can have for falling in love. As we see in *Chungking Express* and *In the Mood For Love*, these opportunities often become caught up in mourning for love that has already been lost. Modernity and loss: two unassuming siblings. Thus, as we receive new and shiny things their insertion into our lives must too often come at the cost of something more organic. The demise of letter writing is another important part of the increasingly smoky ephemeral texture of the ways that we love others, and it is clearly linked to modernity and technology. Letter writing provides said writer with opportunities to explore his/herself and others – opportunities that help enrich a person and their self-understanding. It offers an openness and comfort not usually attributed to conversational communication, perhaps because the communication of letter writing is of a more indirect sort. A person will, I find, often confess more to paper than he or she will to something wrapped in skin. This confessional aspect of a letter often flourishes regardless of whom, in the days to come, might read what the writer has written.

Can it be a total coincidence that the relative obsolescence of the letter has come at a time of increasing difficulty for people to remain close to one another . . . and to themselves? In a number of his books Charles Taylor draws a cohesive picture of an individual's self-actualization and/or self-realizations, such that the process of articulation is constitutive of one's understanding of one's self and the others around it.^{iv} In other words, one gets to know one's self, others and the world through placing these things within language – be it written or

spoken. Consider that love is one of the most important ways through which to understand people. In relation to this, it only solidifies the picture if one recalls one of the more iconic modes of letter writing to be the love letter. What happens to love, then, if the love letter disappears from our set of activities? If we merely come to know people through articulation, how do we *love* people the same way as we once did when the love letter thrived? For I know of nothing quite like the letter – a way to show one's character to someone else in so personal and solitary a way while still projecting those thoughts to another person. Yet letters also foster an appreciation across sender and sendee for the distance in between one another, as opposed to a preoccupation with it. (An unavoidable distance that, as we shall see below, is a very daunting and important one.) Email, with its demented immediacy and intense chronology – would anyone care to know the hour, minute and second upon which a love letter is sent? – is a poor substitute at best.

That the source for *In the Mood For Love*, a novella entitled "Intersection," smacks so resonantly of palimpsests of love letters and/or diary entries merely hints at what is going on beneath the veneer of desperation in the lives of Chow and Su. True to form, during many moments when Wong's characters attempt to engage a relationship – no matter how weakly constituted that relationship may be – their acts resemble something like trying to leave messages, or to write letters, as it were. No. 233 is stymied by his attempts to communicate with love via his pager – a modern form of technology very much removed from the letter. However, his one redemption is achieved through this means, when the blond-wigged woman leaves a message wishing him thanks and a happy birthday. It is the only means through which his "friend in room 704" could contact him to articulate her appreciation, so it suffices insofar as making No. 233 happy. When Faye alters No. 633's apartment she is leaving a sort of spontaneous, anonymous love letter. As her infatuation with the lawman grows, so does the extent to which she leaves traces of her presence. Leung's policeman even talks to these traces, in a way that can be seen as responding to her covert advances. Appropriately enough though, he can only voice his sadness at his past loss, blaming each item for being sad and lonely like he is. On the other hand, No. 633 is privy to two letters, each from the two 'separate' women he falls for during the film. In the first instance, the letter is articulating closure for the stewardess. This is not likely the sort of articulation that No. 633 is looking for, but it nonetheless represents one of the few clear, unambiguous moments of communication between two lovers in either *Chungking Express* or *In the Mood For Love*, the second moment being when Chow receives an ironically similar letter of closure from his wife.

The closing of *In the Mood For Love* represents perhaps the most poignant of such letter-like instances. Chow finds what little tragic and lonely peace/closure he can by whispering his secret into a hole in the wall of an ancient Cambodian ruin and packing it up with soil, reenacting a tradition meant to ease one's soul. This is akin to writing a letter to someone without sending it, which itself is often advised in psychiatry for one who desires closure. Since letter writing is dying, it may be that our capacity to engage with others and ourselves has taken a significant step in a strange direction. Indeed, Chow's act is performed in an ancient Cambodian setting instead of

Faint Messages: Is There Room For Articulation?

... And everything he sees is blurry and indistinct.
—Closing line of *In the Mood For Love*

Some of my fondest memories between that aforementioned ex-lover and I are actually captured in print. This is because we were both very good at writing our thoughts, and these thoughts always seemed so much sweeter when mitigated by paper and the time that elapsed before the addressee read it. Like a strange star gone supernova which a star-gazing child is only privy to after the thousands of years between its inception and the moment when its light first warms our planet, loving thoughts in a letter carry with them some strange eerie beauty once the recipient's eyes finally get to look upon another's heart spilled out in ink. It is no coincidence, then, that the next love I had, Amanda (a woman I should not have gotten so close to while I was still mired in the wreckage of that other lover and me), never really understood many deep, dark things about me until after we had parted ways and I sent her a letter trying to explain myself. (Furthering the irony of love, the two of us are now closer than ever – in small part because of that same letter, and many other attempts at articulation.) To evoke Benjamin once more, one has not yet truly witnessed the growth of such a mind until one sees how he felt himself out, drawing his own limits – and passing them – within his letters, many of which have been published in a collection of his correspondence with Theodor Adorno. I never really overcame the complexity of T.S. Eliot's work until I read a collection of his letters to his wife. Reading the words of men who grow as they partake in that forum, I finally felt like I understood them.

So, modernity and/or progress play a role in framing which sorts of opportunities one can have for falling in love. As we see in *Chungking Express* and *In the Mood For Love*, these opportunities often become caught up in mourning for love that has already been lost. Modernity and loss: two unassuming siblings. Thus, as we receive new and shiny things their insertion into our lives must too often come at the cost of something more organic. The demise of letter writing is another important part of the increasingly smoky ephemeral texture of the ways that we love others, and it is clearly linked to modernity and technology. Letter writing provides said writer with opportunities to explore his/herself and others – opportunities that help enrich a person and their self-understanding. It offers an openness and comfort not usually attributed to conversational communication, perhaps because the communication of letter writing is of a more indirect sort. A person will, I find, often confess more to paper than he or she will to something wrapped in skin. This confessional aspect of a letter often flourishes regardless of whom, in the days to come, might read what the writer has written.

Can it be a total coincidence that the relative obsolescence of the letter has come at a time of increasing difficulty for people to remain close to one another . . . and to themselves? In a number of his books Charles Taylor draws a cohesive picture of an individual's self-actualization and/or self-realizations, such that the process of articulation is constitutive of one's understanding of one's self and the others around it.^{iv} In other words, one gets to know one's self, others and the world through placing these things within language – be it written or

spoken. Consider that love is one of the most important ways through which to understand people. In relation to this, it only solidifies the picture if one recalls one of the more iconic modes of letter writing to be the love letter. What happens to love, then, if the love letter disappears from our set of activities? If we merely come to know people through articulation, how do we *love* people the same way as we once did when the love letter thrived? For I know of nothing quite like the letter – a way to show one's character to someone else in so personal and solitary a way while still projecting those thoughts to another person. Yet letters also foster an appreciation across sender and sendee for the distance in between one another, as opposed to a preoccupation with it. (An unavoidable distance that, as we shall see below, is a very daunting and important one.) Email, with its demented immediacy and intense chronology – would anyone care to know the hour, minute and second upon which a love letter is sent? – is a poor substitute at best.

That the source for *In the Mood For Love*, a novella entitled "Intersection," smacks so resonantly of palimpsests of love letters and/or diary entries merely hints at what is going on beneath the veneer of desperation in the lives of Chow and Su. True to form, during many moments when Wong's characters attempt to engage a relationship – no matter how weakly constituted that relationship may be – their acts resemble something like trying to leave messages, or to write letters, as it were. No. 233 is stymied by his attempts to communicate with love via his pager – a modern form of technology very much removed from the letter. However, his one redemption is achieved through this means, when the blond-wigged woman leaves a message wishing him thanks and a happy birthday. It is the only means through which his "friend in room 704" could contact him to articulate her appreciation, so it suffices insofar as making No. 233 happy. When Faye alters No. 633's apartment she is leaving a sort of spontaneous, anonymous love letter. As her infatuation with the lawman grows, so does the extent to which she leaves traces of her presence. Leung's policeman even talks to these traces, in a way that can be seen as responding to her covert advances. Appropriately enough though, he can only voice his sadness at his past loss, blaming each item for being sad and lonely like he is. On the other hand, No. 633 is privy to two letters, each from the two 'separate' women he falls for during the film. In the first instance, the letter is articulating closure for the stewardess. This is not likely the sort of articulation that No. 633 is looking for, but it nonetheless represents one of the few clear, unambiguous moments of communication between two lovers in either *Chungking Express* or *In the Mood For Love*, the second moment being when Chow receives an ironically similar letter of closure from his wife.

The closing of *In the Mood For Love* represents perhaps the most poignant of such letter-like instances. Chow finds what little tragic and lonely peace/closure he can by whispering his secret into a hole in the wall of an ancient Cambodian ruin and packing it up with soil, reenacting a tradition meant to ease one's soul. This is akin to writing a letter to someone without sending it, which itself is often advised in psychiatry for one who desires closure. Since letter writing is dying, it may be that our capacity to engage with others and ourselves has taken a significant step in a strange direction. Indeed, Chow's act is performed in an ancient Cambodian setting instead of

his urban homestead, hinting that some types of love may feel more at home in the past. Perhaps, as we have seen with Benjamin's angel, love itself is more at home in the past. But the 'lost' love need only be the form of love which we know and expect; there can be other ways to love – ones that are rife with trepidation, and likely equally as precious. Until we all make that adjustment, our depreciation of articulation will continue to ensure that our love is "blurry and indistinct."

But there is still the matter of No. 633's second letter. It was, of course, a boarding pass from Faye – perhaps an indication that there could have been something positive for their love. Alas, as No. 633 would likely put it, the boarding pass was unusable. It was drenched in tears. And all the while it rains.

The Serendipitous: Is There Still Room For Magic/Love?

It's over their damn heads, Frank. Their fear shrinks the world to the size of nothin but their own lives. It blinds them to anything beyond their own houses. All they think is, 'Why me? Please just leave me alone...' All they hope is it'll go away. But it won't go away.

—*Millennium*, Episode 202

Do you really know your wife?

—Su, to Chow

What a coincidence!

Solipscism runs rampant throughout contemporary culture. One of the most confounding things I find in love is the way that you can be convinced that each of you are as one, inasmuch as you have crossed that gap between people that exists due to fear, insecurity, egotism and all of the things that grow out them. It all feels naked and true – especially when you look into each other's eyes and see exactly the same thing. In this sense, love can outrun the scourge of solipscism. Still though, this is a hugely rare state of love – one that I must say I once thought I was part of but now doubt that I ever was, like seeing that ghost again. For the most part, our fears – many of which are brought about by the innate anxiety of modernity and focusing on past failures – and our growing inability to communicate, to 'reach' one another, still rule the day. The insurgence of new age self-control and the do-it-yourself advice surrounding recovery from emotional wounds has, regrettably, convinced the bulk of individuals today that *all* the answers lie within one's self. While this may only be partly true it fosters an already-there desire to turn inward and cocoon one's self in one's own shame and loss, waiting for an answer to magically appear – an answer that is not conclusively within everyone. For the world can be full of mystery *and* conclusions around love, if one is willing and/or capable to reach beyond one's own foibles.

One response to the large amount of pain that comes with loss (pain I am surely not immune to) is that love itself need not die if the era that houses our current intuitions about love fades away. As the jukebox plays over and over again in *Chungking Express*:

It's not every day

We're going to be the same way

There must be a change somehow

There are bad times and good times too.

This is where *Chungking Express* and *In the Mood For Love* enter into complexity. Yes, it seems as though the stable, comfortable timeless love has lost its place. But there are other ways... ways that work in response to the fears and solipscism within which we sail past one another like boats in the night. There is a reference in *Chungking Express* to a song "Love Dies at Dawn." Wong is concerned with love's fleeting qualities – good and bad. There are still ways for people to love. Indeed, the majority of his characters *do* fall in love in the two films in question. But if it is not the stable, direct love then it is an indirect love, a love that is innately tragic since it is hospitable to sailing past one another at times. This is the love we see most closely in *In the Mood for Love*. Chow and Su surely fall in love, but we can see that it need not work through formal social convention. It can happen 'in-between,' in the shadows, within the colorful fluorescent blur of the world around those in love. It goes on beneath convention, outside of the formal modes within which they are "too polite" (an observation leveled at both Chow and Su by Mrs. Suen, Su's landlady). This love is, again, indirect. It is important to note that this indirectness is not a triumph *over* solipscism, but rather a way to work *with* it. This is but a hint of the complexity of contemporary love. Furthermore, the indirect nature applies to Chow and Su's actual relationship as well. Recall that each of them is plagued by the backward gaze and fumbling articulation mentioned above. As such, they have a hard time stepping outside of themselves. We all do. When Su asks Chow if he "knows [his] wife," it is evident that neither of them know their spouses; none of us truly know anyone. Perhaps the closest we can come is similar to Faye, holding a magnifying glass to a long hair in No. 633's bed, trying to feel who this other girl is – so far away, so close. As such, the intimate moments shared by Chow and Su are necessarily indirect and tragic. When Su is 'trapped' in Chow's room while people play Mahjong in the next room, two mirrors frame the view of the lovers. The viewer is only able to see each person's face through the reflections, effectively splitting their gaze, making it indirect. As the camera pans back to Su during this sequence, she is already noticeably frustrated. Later, when they are working on the martial arts serial in apartment 2046, the audience is again only able to see them together through a mirror. Their most loving embrace – when Su breaks down during one of their reenactment rehearsals – is also shown through a mirror. It would seem, then, that their love is indirect, and indeed it must be since it functions in shadows and in spite of the strife that is called social convention. Needless to say, the bulk of the relationship between Faye and No. 633 is indirect as well but instead of composing single shots that indicate this, Wong chooses to show each of them communicating indirectly by being in No. 633's apartment at separate times.

A contradiction has now surfaced: indirect love. This is the love that grows out of modernity and our growing failures to connect with each other intimately in a way that can last. This love exists for the tiny fleeting moments – moments defined by strange and discreet connections within a formally distant world. In fact, love in Wong's films hinge upon such moments. They are the ghostly snapshots that illustrate to the audience just how amazing and exhilarating love can be even when it seems like the starkly indifferent modern world has trampled

all over it. After all, *Chungking Express* and *In the Mood For Love* are about *showing* us love – even if it necessitates taking it away in the end. The fly-on-the-wall perspective of the camera in either film gives viewers the impression of sharing in the beautiful secrets that flutter quickly by when love surges through the surface that normally pins it down. How many days make up the stories in either film? It could be one day; it could be a thousand. But the temporal blurring of the narratives and fluid editing of the images give us flickering glimpses of a half-life of love, like the way a shutter spins in a movie camera imprinting upon celluloid events that are already gone. Time in either film blurs and spurts like the modern world it catalogues and like the fleeting indirect love that has a home there. And all the while it rains.

As mentioned, the love that exists in Wong's films during those crucial moments is about strange and discreet connections. For instance, two girls named May reject No. 233 in the same day. Both policemen are fixated on Chef's Salad. The expiry date for the blonde-wigged woman's drug deal is the same as the expiry date of No. 233's love for May – his birthday, no less. The jade dishware in Su's office is identical to those in the diner her and Chow meet at later.

By the time Su remarks 'what a coincidence' for the umpteenth time, it becomes clear that the connections are far from coincidences. But then there are some things that only seem like coincidence at first. The fact that Chow and Su's husband, Mr. Chen, have the same tie, and the fact that Su and Chow's wife have the same purse are obviously the result of the very affair that sparks the protagonists' romance. The same goes for what seem like anomalies in No. 633's apartment when the changes are actually Faye's doing. And, even though Su claims otherwise, her cooking sesame syrup while Chow is sick is entirely deliberate. In these senses, nothing is a coincidence in Wong's films. They are all acts veiled by love, infatuation and loneliness. As Su tells her boss, "You notice things when you pay attention." These 'coincidences' are akin to the sort of love that exists in modern times. They are quick, fleeting ghosts that one should appreciate, but only with the tragic foreknowledge that it can and likely will sink as spontaneously as they surfaced. So, if one has a quick enough eye in this world, one can notice love too. It's as beautiful, frequent and hidden as those 'coincidences' throughout *Chungking Express* and *In the Mood For Love*.

But are we then as distant from one another as ourselves and the world can make us feel? Hardly. Such is the complexity of contemporary intimacy. As obvious as it may be that something would always be in the way between Su and Chow the two intermingle immediately. The families in both apartments seem like one loose family. The editing in *In the Mood For Love* mashes both apartments into one spatial mess. Su and Chow's belongings even get mixed up while they move into their respective apartments. The first thing Faye does when No. 633 gives her his address is to point out how close he lives. No. 233's only worthwhile investment in interaction with women during *Chungking Express* comes once he has pledged to approach whichever woman may enter the bar next. In these senses, being "in the mood for love" means being so "simply because you're near me." This is not to say that the characters in either film are prepared to fall in love with anyone in close proximity. Rather, it connects the seemingly random closeness of certain strangers to the 'coincidences' that bring them together – coincidences that

are shown to be anything but. In fact, the ensemble-piece texture of *Chungking* is an indication that the intimate dreams and aspirations we all feel are so special, unique and exclusive to our solipsistic selves while they are being chased are not so rare and distinguishing at all. They are still so special; but we all share in them at some point – due to them we all fill up with joy, and get deflated by fear and loss. Thus, the fleeting occurrences are instead the work of love itself as it too struggles to maintain its own calm and tired grace amidst the racing blur and loneliness of today's world. As both *Chungking Express* and *In the Mood For Love* show us with their surrealistic connections and flashes of 'coincidence,' we are not all so far away from each other as our self-serving strife allows us to believe.

The complexity of love that Wong Kar-wai shows viewers in *Chungking Express* and *In the Mood For Love* is complex due to its own internal juxtapositions. Lovers are far away, yet closer than they may feel. Love may always seem as though it is on its way out, but it may just as easily always be on the way in. Love can no longer be timeless, but love and its brilliant flashes are a way to 'slow down' the world and make its ridiculous speed more manageable. Love should be about connecting with each other – and it often is – but instead it is often personified by the space in between one's words. Love can be about being stuck looking at the past; love can sometimes be the only way to be able to look ahead. Perhaps this is even the way that love has always been, and it now finds more similarities between itself and the world than it ever has in the past. But there is one contradiction for which there can be no doubt: love can make one cry just as easily as it can make one smile, for our gains are measured closely to our losses. Throughout *Chungking Express* and *In the Mood For Love* water is commonly likened to tears. Thus the moments most befitting the mysterious challenges of love in the films of Wong Kar-wai are the sequences when Chow and Su spend time sheltered from the rain. Sometimes they are alone in these scenes. Sometimes they are together. As they grow closer in love they stare at each other against the walls of the alley in confusion, and touch each other with both anticipation and regret. And all the while it rains. The rain traps the two lovers there as though they are tethered to a pole. They are in love. Tears have trapped them.

—Why the raincoat?

—I think it will rain.

...who knows when it will rain?

Blair Miller lives in Toronto and is currently finishing his Masters degree in film at York University – an examination of space and identity in the films of Stanley Kubrick. His email address is: redflagthis@hotmail.com

NOTES

- 1 Though it is obvious in many shots that Leung's policeman in fact wears number 663 on his uniform, he is consistently referred to as 'Number 633.' Be it an honest error or a deliberate move, it may even feed into the notion that people often miss the intricacies of each other in contemporary times.
- 2 My thanks here to a friend, Nikolas Kompridis, who once taught me in an aesthetics course the increasingly dual role of pleasure and pain in modern art.
- 3 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257-8.
- 4 For examples, see Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers 1 - Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) or Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

Lisa Yang (Ming) and Zhang Zhen (Si'r)
in *A Brighter Summer Day*



Music and Modernity in *A Brighter Summer Day*

BY SAUL AUSTERLITZ

Fredric Jameson, in his essay "Remapping Taipei," describes the experience of modernity thus:

The social totality can be sensed, as it were, from the outside, like a skin at which the Other somehow looks, but which we ourselves will never see. Or it can be tracked, like a crime, whose clues we accumulate, not knowing that we are ourselves parts and organs of this obscenely moving and stirring zoological monstrosity. But most often, in the modern itself, its vague and nascent concept begins to awaken with the knowledge function, very much like a book whose characters do not yet know they are being read.¹

Jameson describes the aesthetic sensation of modernity as requiring the existence of an omniscient presence, who, "rising

over miniature roof-tops",² connects the disjointed, fragmented experiences of contemporary life, and provides sensations of connection, rhyme, and irony. This is the province of the artist, who alone is capable of converting the random events of daily life into "the material of storytelling, or Literature."³ Edward Yang, in his 1991 film *A Brighter Summer Day*, endorses this view of the nature of art. His film provides its viewers with a large-scale vision of Taipei circa 1960 that is consistently denied to its characters. We are given a series of visual and linguistic repetitions and filmic echoes that make connections, which are invisible to the film's characters. *A Brighter Summer Day's* relationship to the artistic urge similarly reflects Yang's positioning film, literature, and especially music, within the world of the film as revelatory of the complexities of the characters' lives. Yang uses these arts, most

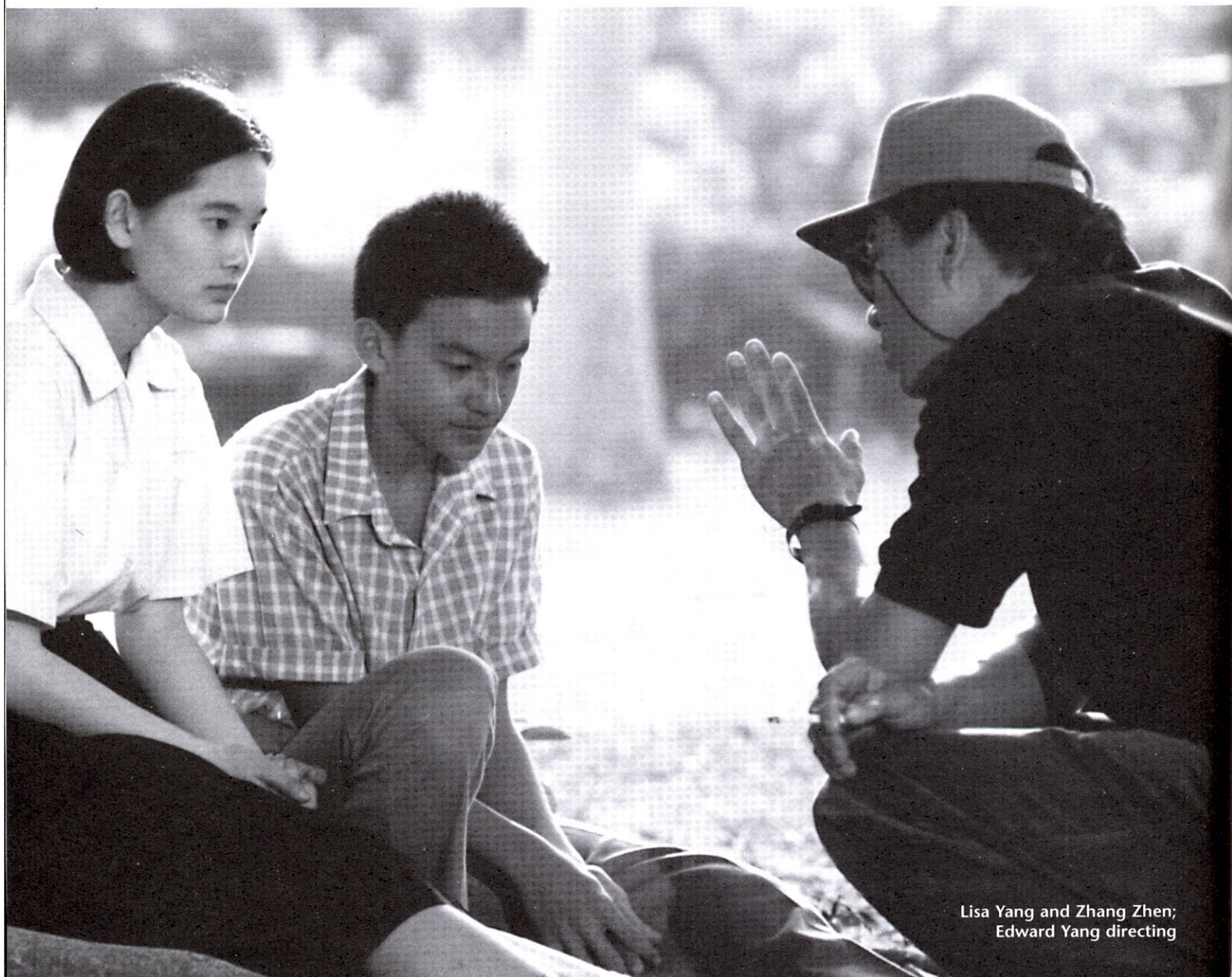
importantly music, as a means of rising over those roof-tops, and providing an understanding of daily life impossible to achieve in the real world. Music becomes the central point at which all the characters' lives connect, and their relationship to music illuminates the normally unseen framework of 1960s Taiwanese life.

The traditional and the modern are in constant tension throughout *A Brighter Summer Day*. Symbols of the two modes emerge everywhere, and reveal a society on the cusp of massive individual and institutional change. *A Brighter Summer Day*'s placement in Yang's filmography, after his critically celebrated films *Taipei Story* and *Terrorizer*, both of which are set in present-day Taipei, is worthy of notice. *A Brighter Summer Day* is a step backward, a journey into the past, and its relationship to the earlier Yang films is one of explanatory prequel. *A Brighter Summer Day* documents the social and cultural changes that create the modernized, late-capitalist life of 1980s Taipei documented in the earlier two films. Such a task allows Yang the freedom to explore a society on the brink of a great transformation, from a traditionally based way of life to a modernized,

urban existence. While the film exists in a number of versions, throughout this essay I will be referring to the 185-minute cut (a 237-minute version is the fullest, and most difficult to find).

The other great transformation shown in *A Brighter Summer Day* is from cultural domination by a series of invaders, including the Japanese and the mainland Chinese, to a new culture primarily associated with the United States. The film's cultural talismans illuminate this complex intertwining of old and new, Japanese, Chinese, and American influences. *A Brighter Summer Day*'s characters treat their surroundings as archaeological, digging to find artifacts relevant to their contemporary existences. Their commingled presence in the film creates a hybrid existence where the traces of past military invaders mix with those of future cultural invaders.

In a similar vein to Yang's later masterpiece *Yi Yi*, *A Brighter Summer Day* takes in a year in the lives of a prototypical Taiwanese family, the Zhangs. However, unlike *Yi Yi*, *A Brighter Summer Day* focuses less on family life and more on the trials of one of the Zhang family sons, Zhao Si'r. Si'r is an adolescent wrestling with the complexities of his life, both at home and



Lisa Yang and Zhang Zhen;
Edward Yang directing

in school. Due to school overcrowding, many of the less gifted or rowdier students are forced to attend classes at night, and Zhao Si'r is one of them. These students understand their position as relative second-class citizens within the school (and social) hierarchy, and take out their aggression by forming gangs. Si'r and his friends belong to the Little Park gang, whose primary rivals are the older, rougher members of the 217 gang, led by the ferocious Shandong. Little Park's erstwhile leader, Honey, has been exiled for some time at the start of the film, having joined the navy as a means of avoiding jail time. Temporarily replacing him is his younger understudy Sly.

Si'r's presence at the conjunction of family and society allows us a large-scale vision of Taiwanese society circa 1960. Life in the classroom and gang are constantly echoed in the greater society surrounding these small groups. The echoes of history are also always present. Taiwan's 20th century history of subjugation is a palpable presence in the film, with the traces of past invaders everywhere. Early in the film, Si'r's mother complains at the dinner table of the music drifting in from a fruit stand outside, saying, "We fought the Japs for 8 years, and now we live in a Japanese house and listen to Japanese music." Her tone is intensely bitter, reflecting the viewpoint that military victory is useless if followed by cultural defeat.

A Brighter Summer Day's setting in 1960 places it at a moment of triangulated cultural subjugation. The recollections of Japanese rule clearly still weigh on the memories of the film's adults, and those familiar with Taiwanese history will immediately grasp that 1960 was during the rule of Chiang Kai-Shek's mainland Nationalists, who had been defeated by Mao Tse-tung and the Communists on the mainland in the 1948 civil war. Still early in its development is the impending cultural hegemony of American films, music, and style. 1960 is a year in which all these factors, those that have departed and those yet to come, can all be seen.

Si'r and his friends have their closest cultural relationship with American rock & roll. Taiwan, not quite a full-fledged member of the modernized world, seems to only presently (in 1960) be discovering the astounding early singles of Elvis Presley recorded in 1956 and 1957, including "Don't Be Cruel" and "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" The music of Presley and other early rock & roll stars galvanizes the adolescents' society, and becomes the primary distinction between themselves and the adult world. Two members of Little Park, Deuce and Cat, are the lead singers of the local band, and their performances become, in many ways, the heart and soul of *A Brighter Summer Day*. The relationship between performance and reality, between art and existence, forms the essential complex duality of the film.

Other arts are also present in the narrative of *A Brighter Summer Day*. The filmmaking world is the location of the film's opening scene, when Si'r and Cat hide in the rafters of the studio in the hopes of spotting the lead actress changing. The camera pans upward, slowly making its way up to the top rafter where the boys hide, and when it reaches them, they drop a book, and reveal their presence to the crew. The characters in the film are immediately identified as avid consumers of culture, rather than producers, a situation they attempt to remedy over the course of the narrative. In addition, the process of creative exploration is shown, in this scene, as a far

from joyous affair. The lead actress is dissatisfied with the lack of respect shown her, the director is unhappy with his supposedly adolescent 40-year-old actress, and the cast and crew seem both dazed and bored, scanning the room in the hopes of finding a previously hidden exit. In a later scene, the director stops Si'r and his quasi-girlfriend, Ming, as they attempt to sneak out of the studio. He eyes Ming, and offers to give her a screen test, possibly seeing in her a freshness and authenticity absent from his aging, demanding actress. This, of course, is a point in favor of the film we are watching, whose lead actress is the very individual whom the fictional director singles out.

Literature, as well, makes a small but crucial appearance in *A Brighter Summer Day*. Honey, the returned leader of the 217 gang, talks to Si'r, and tells him that reading "swashbuckle novels" like *War and Peace* preserved his sanity during the difficult months in the navy. Honey also refers to Napoleon, and to a plot involving an enraged prince, which sounds suspiciously like *Hamlet*. Honey has discovered, in these works, a sense of history absent from his own life. Literature has imparted to him an understanding of life being lived in the context of history, all the more crucial to a Taiwanese people robbed of so much of their history by foreign interlopers. There is a humorous cineaste's joke in Honey's fascination with historical fiction, as his getup is reminiscent of nothing so much as the return of a particularly malevolent Jacques Demy sailor. Nonetheless, what Honey finds in these books is a sense of identification lacking in his surroundings. Literature identifies his place within the historical continuum, and allows him to take a step back from his own existence and grasp it as a whole. As he says, "I found people in the past were just like us in our street gangs." This discovery encourages Honey to reverse the equation, and provide a similar service to others like him. "If I could write, I'd write a novel for people like me to read in the future."

Yang grants wisdom to Honey, but it is a startlingly ironic bequest, for his understanding comes at the expense of a certain knife's-edge brutality, and he is soon murdered by his rival Shandong. Honey's enlightenment has revealed two important facts about the society he finds himself in: first, that such knowledge is an incredibly dangerous luxury in Taiwanese society of the time, and second, that no one in his immediate surroundings has any want or need for such a luxury. Enlightenment is something that the other members of the 217 gang, and the great majority of the characters of *A Brighter Summer Day*, cannot afford. Literature, as such, has a mind-expanding capability sorely lacking in any other aspects of these characters' lives, but the wide-angle portrait of society it provides also lessens the finely tuned attention to detail so necessary for survival. As we are shown, the pleasures of literature can be fatal.

Music, however, is the axis on which Yang's film turns. Yang frequently chooses cultural talismans as centerpieces for his films, from baseball in *Taipei Story* to photography in *Terrorizer* and *Yi Yi*. *A Brighter Summer Day* is the only film in his oeuvre, though, in which Yang expresses any interest in rock & roll as a cultural medium. Specifically, the characters in the film are tied musically and emotionally to the groundbreaking work of Elvis Presley. Elvis as talisman connects *A Brighter Summer Day*, in at least a superficial way, to *American Graffiti* and its scores of imitators among American films of the 1970s and 1980s. In this light, *A Brighter Summer Day*

becomes a negative of those American films, a story of cultural and sexual awakening through music that runs parallel to its American cousins. By virtue of Taiwan's gnarled history, and the specific milieu of the film, the story it tells, while superficially similar, is markedly different in tone and scope from the Lucas film. The aura of nostalgia that the two films share is augmented in *A Brighter Summer Day* by pervasive reminders of the era's harshness— a reality principle absent from the sugar-coated fantasia of *American Graffiti*.

The relationship between music and life in Yang's film is continually complicated by the way one bleeds into the other. Each of the film's musical performances is surrounded or interrupted by details of the plot that reflect, in one way or another, on the music. In many of the scenes, the performances are ironized, their yearning romanticism at odds with the threat of violence that is constantly swirling around them. In other scenes, however, the romantic, questing nature of the songs are only intensified by their surroundings, the performance of these songs a direct revelation of the characters' emotions, as in a more traditional musical. *A Brighter Summer Day* belongs to the backstage genre of musical, in that all the performances are justified by the plot— i.e., a character would never burst into song if not on stage before a paying audience, or emoting into a tape recorder. The songs the characters sing are all American pop songs of the early rock and roll era, and as such the subject matter is almost exclusively love and romance. The selection of these songs, their performance, and their placement within the body of the film, reveal much about the relationships in *A Brighter Summer Day*.

In the first musical scene, the bumpers to the performance indicate the precise relationship of song to life, and the ways that the songs articulate emotions too complex to be otherwise expressed. The scene opens with Si'r standing across the street from a house, gazing longingly at Ming, the object of his affections, as she enters. The camera is placed directly behind Si'r, aligning our gaze with his. As the scene progresses, there is a slow fade up on the soundtrack of a crooning singer. The singing gets progressively louder, until there is a cut from Si'r's point of view to an interior shot of the performance, with Deuce, one of the leaders of the Little Park gang, serving as lead singer. What is most striking about the band is their remarkable re-creation of an American rock band, circa 1956. Deuce wears a white T-shirt, rolled up to reveal his biceps, and the band's guitarist sports the clunky black glasses favored by American stars like Buddy Holly. Their stage presence is completed by the mural of a lone palm tree and flashing multicolored Christmas lights that serve as decoration. The replica of an American band, while slightly threadbare in stage presence, is assisted by the astonishing imitation of American singing in English, a language which none of the characters in the film (with the exception of Si'r's sister, their song transcriber) evince any ability to speak. Deuce and his sidekick, the falsetto Cat, emit a pitch-perfect imitation of American singers virtually indistinguishable from the genuine product.

Cat replaces Deuce after the first song, and his number is a litany of positive changes in the singer's life, keyed around the repeated phrase "because you love me." As he sings in his pre-pubescent falsetto, Deuce storms offstage and into the concert hall's kitchen, where he engages in a violent, angry altercation with Sly, the gang's other leader, over Sly's indiscretions with Deuce's girlfriend Jade. Deuce attempts to attack Sly with a

garbage can lid, and is repeatedly held back from lunging at Sly. Cat dashes offstage between songs to speak to Si'r, standing outside, and informs him that the entire ruckus was his fault, emerging as a result of his having indiscreetly informed on Sly. After imparting this information, Cat dashes back onstage for the next song, whose chorus is, "It's just like heaven, being here with you— you're just like an angel, my angel baby."

The sharp contrast between the innocently romantic tone of the songs and the anguished, tortured nature of the romantic relationships on display is emphasized by Yang's thorough integration of the two realms in this sequence. Neither Si'r's feelings for Ming, nor the complex roundelay of jealousy between Sly, Deuce, and Jade conform neatly to the romantic clichés of pop songs. Music, and art as a whole, as a beautiful lie is a motif that recurs throughout *A Brighter Summer Day*. The elevated sentiments of the songs are overwhelmed by the violence constantly simmering underneath the surface.

A short shot during the concert sequence provides the key for understanding these adolescents' behavior. Sly walks into the concert hall with a girl on one arm, strutting and emitting a glow of cocksureness while jauntily smoking a cigarette. This brutal parody of gangster/businessman's behavior is an indication of the entire adolescent society's basis in emulation of the adult society surrounding them. The random brutalization experienced in school is repeated in their relationships with each other, with hostility and violence as the only acceptable solutions to the problems at hand. The aping of behavior swings both ways— in an early scene, Si'r's father and his more influential friend confer in a dark corner at a party about the possibility of a promotion, and there is a remarkable similarity between their conversation and that of Si'r and his friends in posture and attitude. We come to understand that they, too, are in gangs of sorts, and that their lives operate by codes just as binding and restrictive as those of their sons. The lives of Si'r and his friends become a microcosm of Taiwanese society as a whole, reflecting the confusion, uncertainty, and violence of everyday life.

In the second performance sequence, the same elements are present, but intensified. Honey appears uninvited outside the concert hall like an avenging angel, hell-bent on starting a ruckus. He arrives during the singing of the national anthem, while everyone is stock-still, standing at attention. Honey's smooth, gliding walk manages to convey the impression of each step being his last without ever pausing. Again, Yang cuts between the ever-escalating fight and the performance inside, utilizing a shot from the side of the stage that includes the swooning girls standing onstage as well as the performers. The third segment of this triangulated sequence (the song performed has a chorus of "it couldn't be anyone else but you") is of the repeated exchange of glances between Jade and Ma, Si'r's new friend. Love and violence intertwine here as in the first sequence, forever inseparable. The music fades out as Honey and Shandong walk together down the darkened, empty road. Honey is talkative and excited, while his counterpart silently lurks behind him. As a car passes them, Shandong shoves Honey into its path, and Honey lets loose a strangled cry in the moment before he is killed. Yang immediately cuts back to the concert hall, where a new band is performing "Don't Be Cruel," complete with Elvis' trademark vocal yelps. The threat and the sadness of violence are

ever-present inside the performances of the songs. By virtue of Yang's cross-cutting, the audience possesses an understanding of the harsh undercurrents beneath the songs that the adoring crowds seem to lack. Yang's recurring shots of the cheering (mostly female) audience highlights the growing gap in knowledge between the approving crowds and the film's audience. We (the film's audience) are repeatedly allowed glimpses of the sadness behind the romance, the experience behind the songs' innocence. The songs are not allowed to stand as is, but are complicated by their relationship with the characters' lives, made deeper and sadder by their surroundings.

The only performances left in *A Brighter Summer Day*, following the two concerts, are Cat's, and both involve a tape recorder rather than an audience. In Si'r's sister's room, surrounded by pictures of Elvis on the walls, Cat records his performance of "Are You Lonesome Tonight?", complete with the mis-transcribed line that provides the film's title. Following the song, Cat tells Si'r about Ma's discovery in his house's attic— a Japanese samurai sword, and a picture of a young American woman. These two artifacts, in addition to the tape recorder, stand as indices of the presence of a *mélange* of cultural imperializers in the film's Taiwan. The place of honor accorded to American music by *A Brighter Summer Day's* adolescents fits this pattern of Taiwanese cultural domination and reappropriation. These objects are constant reminders of Taiwan's inbetween status, caught between the Japanese, Chinese, and American empires. Rather than attempt to ignore this status, Si'r and his friends seek to celebrate the unique position of "this unknown place," as Elvis Presley refers to Taiwan later in the film.

A Brighter Summer Day shifts its narrative focus at this point, moving away from the members of the Little Park gang toward a concentration on the Zhang family. Si'r's father is taken away by the secret police and interrogated for a number of days, an experience that permanently scars him. He becomes a harsher parent, brutally beating his son Lao Er for the crime of pawning his mother's watch. Si'r is expelled from school, and must spend his days studying for the Day School entrance exam. In the meantime, separated from Ming by his expulsion, he becomes increasingly jealous of Ming's infidelities. His friends all seem to have changed as well— Sly, the former proto-capitalist hothead, has visibly calmed, not even flinching when Si'r slaps him, where in his first appearance in the film, he had brained a terrified boy with a brick. Si'r's frustration at his helplessness, and at the suffering inherent in the world, grows more palpable with each passing moment. While walking with Ming, she tells him to slow down his dogged pursuit of her affections, saying, "We have all the time in the world." Ming repeats word-for-word the interrogator's response to Si'r's father's complaints. The repetition draws a connection between Si'r's father's interrogation and Si'r's relationship with Ming, with both serving as trials by fire that neither can pass.

Si'r meets Ming one more time, promenading with her in a public square. Si'r offers his help in changing her for the better, which raises her ire. Yang cuts to Ming in close-up, angrily telling Si'r, "You're just like all the rest. You can't change me...You want me to change? I'm like the world. The world will never change." Si'r, in response, stabs Ming, embracing her as the life ebbs from her, her head lolling on Si'r's shoulder. He screams at her, "You're hopeless and shameless," a

retort that applies equally, in his equation, to the world at large. Yang cuts from the medium two-shot of their dance of death to a longer shot that takes in the activity surrounding them. The crowd of young people continues enjoying themselves, taking no notice of the catastrophe unfolding in their midst. Life flows on around them, oblivious to their personal tragedy.

In the film's crushing final two scenes, Cat brings his tape of "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" to the prison where Si'r is incarcerated. He pleads with the jailers to bring his tape to Si'r, and as he walks away, we hear the song, and the contents of Cat's letter. Over an image of the prisoners sweeping up the lushly green yard in the dappled midday sunlight, Cat tells Si'r about sending his recording to Elvis Presley, who responded that he was surprised to hear of his music's popularity in "this unknown place", and has sent him a ring. The letter and the song are harshly interrupted on the soundtrack, and Yang cuts from the placid prisoners' scene to the guards' tossing Cat's tape into the garbage.

In a subtle match, the prison guard has the same intricate tea glass as Si'r's school principal. Yang never shows the guard's face, shooting him from the back only, and as a result the two men are joined, becoming the same figure of corrupt, jaded authority. The junked tape stands for all the missed communication of the film, as well as for Taiwan's aspirations as a whole. "This unknown place" loses its innocence, its desire for wholeness amidst the detritus of other empires, in Si'r's tragic fate. We never see Si'r again after he is arrested— he exists only as an absence in the lives of those left behind.

In *A Brighter Summer Day's* final scene, Si'r's mother and sister listen to the radio as they hang laundry to dry. The camera follows his sister, then pans right to look out a window to the garden, where his mother unfolds clothes. In the middle of unfolding one garment, she freezes, having heard Si'r's name on the list of students accepted for enrollment in the prestigious Day School, in the foreign language department. The credits begin to roll over this final image of a woman frozen in the unbearable awareness of exactly what she has lost. Taiwan, too, has lost— lost its opportunity for change at a crucial moment, choosing instead to follow the path of continued cultural domination that will create the Taiwan of Yang's contemporary films. As per Jameson's dictum, Yang creates a book whose characters do not know they are being read, a realist document of Taiwanese society that provides a God's-eye-view perspective of their lives. In the confluence of the two concluding scenes, Yang provides a unity of the personal and political, cultural and social spheres of the film for a literarily fitting finale accessible only to his viewers, and not his characters. And across the continuum of Yang's oeuvre, the story of modernization, cultural confusion, and personal anguish will continue onward toward the present. The Zhangs will become the Jians of *Yi Yi*, perhaps more successful than their forebears, but equally disoriented as to their place in Taiwanese society, and the world as a whole.

Saul Austerlitz is a freelance film critic in New York City.

NOTES

- 1 Jameson, Fredric. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*. London: BFI Publishing, 1992, p. 114.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.

LETTERS

To the editors,

One of the most interesting articles in the recent issue of CineAction focusing on Asian Cinema was Catherine Russell's on 'Three Japanese actresses of the 1950s'. Critics who have studied the Japanese cinema still tend to approach it in naive auteurist terms, viewing the master-pieces of Ozu, Mizoguchi and Naruse as the decontextualised creations of great artists, rather than as the outstanding products of a fertile commercial system. Russell's essay, with its focus on star persona and audience expectations, should help to counteract this trend, and demonstrate how those artists, like, say, Hitchcock, Ford or Minnelli, worked within a system with conventions at once restrictive and rich in potential.

It is a pity, however, that an underlying project of the article is a denigration of one of the major artists of that studio system, Yasujiro Ozu. Seeing his rigour as "emblematic of a repressive and controlling social system," she implies that his style is itself designed to repress the emotions of his characters. While Ozu's films clearly portray a repressive social milieu, I am worried by the implication that they endorse it. The characters played by Setsuko Hara, usually the victims of this repression, are generally presented in such a way as to elicit maximum sympathy for their difficulties. Granted, they seldom express their unhappiness openly, but public displays of emotion are rare enough in Japan today, let alone fifty years ago.

Furthermore, Russell furthers her argument by overlooking many of the complexities of the material. In the case of *Early Summer* – one of the supreme achievements both of its director and of Japanese film production – Russell gives a partial and misleading account of the film's conclusion. When Hara/Noriko bursts into tears after her parents accept her marriage plans, she is crying because she knows her action will break up the family, who will be unable to

continue living in Tokyo without her financial support. The parents will move to the country and are likely to be lonely. Russell claims that Ozu "cuts away from her display of emotion to a shot of the landscape outside the window" which she describes as "a transcendent transformation of her confused emotions into an image of beautiful contentment." In fact the cut takes us to the rural location to which the parents have moved, and we then see them in their new home watching a bridal procession and wondering how their daughter is. They remark, not with much conviction, that they have been happier than most – and at this point the camera begins to cut back successively until their home is lost amidst the corn. The final image is scarcely transcendent – rather it brings home the geographical isolation of the characters, and hints at their lonely future.

Since this future misery is a direct consequence of the family's desire to fulfill the traditional expectations of Japanese society, it is rather difficult to read it as an example of Ozu's alleged conservatism. Ozu does not openly criticise the social organisation, but he clearly reveals the unhappiness it causes. It is a disservice both to his achievement and that of his actresses to imply that his films complacently served a repressive social order.

Yours Sincerely,
Alexander Jacoby

Editorial comment:

My one reservation with the above is that Alex Jacoby is too polite. At the core of Catherine Russell's critique of Ozu's films with Setsuko Hara is an error of monumental proportions: 'One important effect of this repetition of characters and plots from one Ozu film to another is that Hara's character never actually gets married'. Had she actually *seen* the films? Even the most cursory viewing should have been sufficient to correct such a misreading. For the record: *Late Spring* analyses the way in which Hara is forced (by various social pressures) into marriage, the wedding becoming the film's tragic climax; *Early Summer* ends with Hara leaving to marry the man she has (somewhat reluctantly) chosen against her family's wishes; in *Tokyo Story* she is a war widow, obstinately resisting her mother-in-law's pressure to remarry (we learn that her husband went out at night with his buddies and came home drunk). No one but the mother-in-law assumes that Hara is motivated by the traditional Japanese 'fidelity'. In the much later *Late Autumn* she has a daughter, and I don't think we are meant to assume she was illegitimate. Hara, in fact, either is or has been or is about to be married in all the Ozu films I have been able to see. What is more (as I have argued at length in the chapter on Ozu in *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*, and no one has so far challenged me), the three films in which she plays 'Noriko' are centred on her resistance to marriage as an institution for the curbing of women's freedom. Her choice of a husband in *Early Summer* is of a man with whom she will at least be on equal terms.

Robin Wood.

cineACTION ORDER FORM

Mail to
CineAction
40 Alexander St.
Suite 705
Toronto, Ontario
Canada
M4Y 1B5

SUBSCRIPTIONS

ONE YEAR (3 issues) \$21 Individual \$40 Institutions

TWO YEARS (6 issues) \$36 Individual \$70 Institutions

POSTAGE: U.S. orders payable in U.S. dollars.

Abroad add \$15 for 1 year, \$25 for 2 year subscription

Please start
my subscription
with issue # _____

TO PURCHASE BACK ISSUES

Use the list of back issues on the facing page to select
what you would like to order. List your selections below.

ISSUES # _____

Price per single issue: Canada \$6 CAN U.S.A. \$7US Abroad \$9

Price per double issue: Canada \$8 CAN U.S.A. \$9US Abroad \$11

AMOUNT ENCLOSED \$ _____

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

TELEPHONE _____

CITY _____

PROV/STATE _____

COUNTRY _____

CODE _____

BACK ISSUES STILL AVAILABLE

If you would like any of these
back issues delivered to you,
fill out the order form above.

- 1 Neglected Films of the 80s
- 2 Women in Contemporary
Hollywood
- 3/4 Reading the Text (double issue)
- 8 Revaluation
- 9 Comedy
- 12 Teen Films
- 13/14 Film Noir (double issue)
- 15 Interpretation
- 16 Canadian Cinema
- 17 Re:Positioning
- 19/20 Critical Issues (double issue)
- 21/22 Rethinking Authorship

- (double issue)
- 24/25 Feminist Film Theory/ Criticism
(double issue)
- 28 Canadas: Cinema and Criticism
- 29 Revaluation: Hollywood
- 30 Framing the Family
- 31 Narrative and Film
- 34 Modernism
- 35 Gays and Hollywood, Queer
Cinema
- 36 Toronto International Film
Festival Reviews
- 37 Movements: History and
Filmmaking
- 38 Murder in America
- 39 Contemporary World Cinemas
- 40 Re-Readings and a Spike Lee
Dossier
- 41 Style
- 42 Chinese Films
- 43 Films of the 90s

- 44 Performance
- 45 Canadian Cinema;
Festivals
- 46 The Western: Then and Now
- 47 Anything But Hollywood
- 49 Canadian Films/Sayles/Third
Cinema/Festival
- 50 Hitchcock & Cukor:
SPECIAL 50TH ANNIV.
ISSUE
- 51 What Happened?
- 53 Horror
- 54 Screwball Comedy
- 55 Star Image Icon
- 56 Shifting Narratives
- 57 Film in Canada
- 58 World Cinema Since 1990
- 59 Max Ophuls Centenary
- 60 East Asian Cinemas
- 61 New Canadian Cinema

